スレイヤーズすぺしゃる⑪

激走！乗合馬車！

神坂 一

イラスト あらいずみるい

富士見ファンタジア文庫

Slayers Special Volume 11

Wild Ride! The Stagecoach!

By Hajime Kanazaka

Machine Translated and Edited by Eff_Efferson (March 2026)

For more: visit tenchimuyotranslationblog.blogspot.com

Everything for the Truth (Part 1)

CHUGOGOGOGOGOGON!

Drowning out the surrounding bustle, countless small explosions erupted around me right in the middle of the shopping district.

"Waaaaagh!?"

"Hieeeeeee!"

Panic immediately seized the passing pedestrians.

—That spell... **Explosion Dance (Dug Haut)**!?

It’s a low-power fire spell mostly used for intimidation or flashy demonstrations. I felt the presence behind me and spun around—

"Ho-ho-ho-ho! Finally, you noticed me, Lina Inverse! I’ve been calling out to you for ages, but you completely ignored me..."

"Don't fire off attack spells in the middle of town just to get someone's attention!"

POW!

My flying kick connected squarely with the face of the speaker—Naga.

"Lina!? What was that for!?" Naga shrieked, clutching her face. "And after I went through the trouble of bringing you a lucrative job offer!"

"That’s my line! And besides... a job offer...?"

I could feel my face twitching. Naga: my self-proclaimed rival, but practically just a parasite. She dresses in her "evil sorceress" look year-round regardless of the weather and laughs like a maniac at every opportunity. There was no way a job she accepted would be "normal." I’d tasted enough bitterness from her "offers" in the past.

"—Incidentally, I am the client."

A slender man in his thirties stepped forward. He wasn't wearing a mantle, but his black-themed clothing gave off a scholarly, sorcerous vibe. His brown hair was tied back, and he wore a monocle over his right eye.

"Medio Grandship, of the Public Relations Department, Dryad City Sorcerers' Association."

As he spoke, his monocle glinted sharply in the sunlight.

Dryad City, in the Kingdom of Raltigue, is nestled among mountains but blessed with a warm climate and abundant water. It's a flourishing trade hub. It has a relatively large Sorcerers' Association, but this branch contains a unique department found nowhere else: the Public Relations Department, where Medio-san works.

"Sorcerers, once they immerse themselves in research, tend to develop tunnel vision," Medio-san explained as we sat in a quiet eatery. We had moved locations because talking to Naga after she fired off spells in public is a one-way ticket to being hauled off by the town guards.

Medio sipped a small cup of cognac. "They don't care about world events or even what their peers are researching. I believe this isolation is why the Association is always so slow to respond to crises."

"Well, you've got a point there," I nodded, poking at an orange soufflé.

Broadly speaking, there are two types of sorcerers: the Research Type and the Practical Type. People like me, fascinated by the application of spells, live like wandering mercenaries to test our limits. Research types, however, lock themselves away with dusty manuscripts. Naturally, the permanent staff of any Association branch consists mostly of the latter—"Research Idiots," as Medio hinted.

"However!" Medio continued, his voice rising. "It's useless to tell people who call the outside world 'vulgar trifles' to pay more attention. That is why our official publication, the **'Dryad Spokes,'** exists! We track, investigate, and report on phenomena worthy of sorcerous study to force these shut-ins to look at reality! But some subjects are dangerous. That is why I require you two to act as my bodyguards and research assistants for our next scoop!"

"Well, Lina? It's not a bad deal, is it?" Naga said, draining a mug of brandy in one gulp.

The pay was decent, and building a connection with a Sorcerers' Association is never a bad idea.

"Alright," I said, finishing my tea. "I'll take the job."

"At that moment! Emerging from the forest, the investigative team beheld it! The giant lake shrouded in deep mist finally revealed its form!"

Medio-san stood at the edge of a cliff overlooking a massive mountain lake, shouting at the top of his lungs to no one in particular while scribbling furiously on parchment.

Behind him, I was busy.

"Nnngh... gack... why is every job you take... like this!?"

I was strangling Naga with all my might.

I had found out the truth about the *Dryad Spokes* after accepting the job. According to other members of the Association, it started with serious articles. But "events worthy of sorcerous study" don't happen every day. To keep the magazine going, Medio turned to tabloid sensationalism. Recent headlines included: *I Was Abducted by an Orange Orb and Had Metal Implanted in My Brain*, *The Vampire Seeking Blood Donations*, and *Secret Military Alliance Between Royalty and Demons*. Total junk.

Our current assignment?

"TRACKED! THE PHANTOM GIANT FISH OF THE MISTY LAKE! THE BEAUTIFUL SORCERESS REPORTER SAW IT!"

It was suspicious, tasteless, and utterly embarrassing. I really wanted to squeeze the life out of Naga for this.

"Now then," Medio said, finishing his sketch. "Time for you to help. Dive to the bottom of the lake and check things out. Oh, and do it as a skin-dive—no magic allowed."

"Excuse me?" I frowned. "Diving is one thing, but why can't we use spells?"

Medio pointed his pen at the lake. "Because it makes for a better story!"

We stared at him, speechless.

"A defenseless, young female reporter braving a lake rumored to hold a monster fish! That’s where the thrill is! Don't you understand!?"

"Not really..."

"Tch! Today's youth have no respect for journalism! Now, go!"

"Wait," Naga asked, "is there actually a giant fish here?"

"I don't know! That's why we're investigating! To find the truth behind the rumors!"

"And where exactly did these rumors come from?" I asked lazily.

Medio puffed out his chest. "I spread them myself!"

BOOM! (Metaphorical self-destruct)

"Wait a minute! That's just a complete fabrication!?" I yelled.

"Fabrication!? How rude! Rumors and truth are things we, the media, create!"

"That... is the definition of a fabrication..."

"My reporting *is* the truth!"

"AAAAAGH!"

I collapsed, holding my head. His passion had clearly gone off the rails. I wanted to quit, but I didn't want to pay the cancellation fee.

"Fine. Naga, go get 'em. Good luck with the diving."

"Ho-ho! You make me laugh, Lina! Why should I, the great Naga—"

"BECAUSE YOU ACCEPTED THE JOB!"

KICK!

My roundhouse kick sent Naga flying off the cliff.

SPLASH!

A massive pillar of water erupted. However, she didn't dive. She just floated face-down, motionless.

"Hey! Dive! You're ruining the report!" Medio screamed at the floating Naga.

After Naga dried off (bragging that she only survived because of her "luck"), we prepared to dive again. I refused to get my clothes wet, so we compromised: we would use magic to create a **Wind Barrier** around us to stay dry while submerged.

Deep at the bottom of the lake, it was pitch black. The water was clear, but the mist and depth blocked the sunlight.

"Lina, something just moved over there," Naga whispered.

"Probably just a normal fish."

Naga cast a **Lighting (Light)** spell. The magical glow illuminated a fish nearby. It had a head like a salmon.

Except it was the size of a dragon.

"GYAAAAAAAH!"

I lost it. I controlled the barrier frantically and rocketed to the surface.

"Pwah! Hah... hah..."

"What are you panicking for, Lina?" Naga asked calmly.

"How are you so calm!?"

"What are you two doing!?" Medio complained as we reached the shore. "Is the investigation done?"

"A fish! A fish!" I gasped.

"Of course there are fish. It's a lake."

"No! A giant one! The size of a dragon! A real monster fish!"

Medio laughed. "Don't be ridiculous. Giant fish don't exist. That's nonsense."

"Old man... do you even hear yourself? You're the one who sent us down there for it!"

"Who are you calling an old man!? I'm still technically in my twenties if you subtract two and round down!"

"You're an old man! But that’s not the point! There really was a huge fish!"

Medio looked at Naga. "Is it true?"

"Ho-ho! It was a big fish, certainly. But to be shaken by something like that... you're still just a child, Lina Inverse."

"Oho!" Medio's eyes lit up. "This might be the first time in a while I can report the actual truth!"

"So you haven't been reporting truth until now!?"

"Lies are a means to an end! Anyway! If we catch this fish, everyone at the Association will have to respect me! The *Dryad Spokes* will go mainstream! Go back down and catch it alive!"

"Wait! That wasn't the deal!" I yelled.

"Don't argue! I've already come up with the headline: *DEATH STRUGGLE AT THE LAKE! BEAUTIFUL SORCERESS REPORTER VS. MYSTERIOUS GIANT FISH!*"

Naga smirked. "Fine, Lina. If we can't catch it alive, we'll just kill it and bring back the corpse as proof."

Medio thought about it. "A corpse... less impact, but fine! We don't have a way to transport a live dragon-sized fish back to town anyway. Do it!"

We went back down. I handled the barrier and movement while Naga was on "attack duty." (I didn't trust her with the barrier, but I also didn't trust her with the attacking. It was a lose-lose situation.)

We searched the dark depths. Suddenly, five or six of the giant fish emerged from the darkness, heading straight for us.

"NYAAAAAH!" We both screamed.

"Naga! Do something!"

"I'm on it! Don't rush me!"

Naga frantically started chanting. But in her panic, she chose the wrong spell.

"**Burst Flare (Windy Shield/Wind Wave)!?** No— **Bram Blast (Wind Fang Blast)!**"

BOOM!

Firing a wind-based attack spell *inside* a wind-based air barrier is a recipe for disaster. The explosion shattered our protection instantly.

I woke up to a cold sensation on my cheek.

"Where...?"

I was in a cave. Stalactites hung from the ceiling, and the sound of dripping water echoed. The walls were covered in glowing moss.

I pieced it together: Naga's spell reacted weirdly with my barrier, and the resulting chaos must have blown me into an underwater tunnel that led to this air pocket. Naga was nowhere to be seen, but she's too annoying to die easily, so I wasn't worried.

"Have you regained consciousness?" a clear, feminine voice asked.

"Who's there!?"

I looked around. No one. Just the black water and the glowing moss.

"Are you the one who saved me?" I asked.

"Yes... well... actually, I have something I would like to discuss with you."

"Discuss? Why me?"

"The other person... did not seem like the type one could have a rational conversation with."

(Fair point.)

"I know I am in no position to ask for favors, but please, I need your help."

"I'm not helping someone who won't even show their face," I grumbled.

Silence.

"You are right. I apologize. I am coming."

Splash.

Footsteps approached from the water. I turned around, and she was standing right in front of me.

(Everything for the Truth: TO BE CONTINUED!)

Next Episode Preview

Who is the mysterious figure who appeared before Lina in the lakeside cave!?

What about Medio's position, which has been completely forgotten!?

And as expected, is there once again no room for Naga to actually be useful!?

Next time on *Slayers*: **"Everything for the Truth" (Part 2)**.

Wait for it—but don't get your hopes up! (*Hey, hey!*)

Everything for the Truth (Part 2)

Synopsis

Lina and Naga were asked to assist with an investigation for the Dryad City Sorcerers' Association's official magazine. However, what seemed like a legitimate request turned out to be a scheme to provide muscle for shady tabloid articles!

While reluctantly helping the journalist Medio, a swarm of giant fish appeared in the lake. Caught in the blast of Naga’s panicked spell, Lina was swept into an underground cave deep beneath the water. There, a figure appeared before her...!?

"...Y-you...!?"

I could hear my own voice trembling. The figure appearing before me was—not human.

Her shape was exactly like a human woman, but her entire body glowed with a faint, jade-colored light, reflecting the bioluminescent moss on the walls. Her long hair, reaching down to her waist, was the same.

A poet might have called her a "Water Spirit," but I had a better idea of what her true identity was.

"...Could it be...!? But that’s impossible!"

As I stared in shock, she gave a solemn nod.

"As you suspect—I am one of those you call the **'Sea-Sea People' (Suireizoku)**."

"WHAAAAAT!?"

I couldn't help but shout. The Sea-Sea People—according to the books, they are a race that lives in freshwater lakes, known for their extremely gentle nature.

I say "according to the books" because, by all accounts, they were supposed to have vanished ages ago. The books I read at the Sorcerers' Association explicitly used the

word "Extinct."

The reason for their downfall was a painful one: massacre by humans. Because of their unique physical structure, they were seen by sorcerers as nothing more than a collection of rare magical materials. Specifically, their liver—or maybe it was the heart—was rumored to grant humans a guaranteed extension of life. In every era, there are rotten people who won't hesitate to spend gold or take a life to live a little longer. That was what wiped them out.

...Or so the story went.

"So you survived... hiding somewhere..."

She nodded again. "Yes. We used this lake as our sanctuary. Perhaps there are others of our kind surviving elsewhere, but we have had no way to confirm it. All we can do is pass the time... in silence."

She gazed into the distance.

Ugh... I'm really bad at dealing with this kind of heavy atmosphere. I cleared my throat.

"So, what is it you wanted to discuss with me?"

"Ah, yes. Earlier... when those large fish attacked you... please don't be angry. We were the ones controlling them. It was to ensure no one approached our domain."

I see. So they were basically guard dogs.

"You may not believe me, but we had no intention of causing harm. We simply didn't want humans near this place. One of our kin was controlling the fish to scare you away—that was all. However, because of the spell your companion cast, the kin who was controlling the fish was apparently swept up to the surface..."

"So, you want me to find them?"

"I am well aware this is a selfish request. But if that child is found by humans and our existence is discovered... we will face our destruction once again."

"In short, you want to make sure the secret doesn't get out."

"Yes," she nodded.

"But why ask me? I'm a human. I could just go out and blabber about you to everyone. Wouldn't it be more certain to silence me and search for your friend yourselves?"

"I... do not like those kinds of methods. Furthermore, your companion is above. If we

went to the surface to search, he would surely see us. If we had harmed you, your companion would never forgive us."

(Well, if she means Medio... if something happened to me, he'd probably just be happy to have a headline like: *Beautiful Reporter Dies Mysterious Death! The Terrifying Secret of the Misty Lake!*)

But saying that would just complicate things.

"I see..." I crossed my arms.

To be honest, I wanted to accept. Partly because she saved me, but mostly because my conscience would keep me awake at night if I refused.

If word got out, they'd be "protected" on paper, but in reality, every rich person obsessed with longevity would be hunting them within the week. I had no interest in sacrificing an entire race for a bit of cheap fame.

"Um..." Seeing my silence, she spoke up hesitantly. "Of course, we will provide a reward. We have heard that this is quite valuable among humans..."

She held out a raw **emerald** the size of a fist.

I didn't know the exact value, but even at a fire-sale price, it was worth several times what Medio was paying.

Duty, compassion, and a fat reward. There was no reason to say no.

"Fine. What's the name of the missing one?"

"Cremia!"

Her face lit up. I gave a big nod and thumped my chest.

"Leave it to me! Lina Inverse will handle this!"

I breached the surface of the lake shortly after, quite far from where Medio was standing. The mist would hide me from him.

I bet the Sea-Sea People are making this mist on purpose, I thought.

Before Naga or Medio noticed me, I had to find Cremia! I started a chant, but before I could finish—

"Kyah!"

A woman's scream echoed through the mist from Medio's direction.

Dammit! Am I too late!?

"**Raywing!**"

I completed the high-speed flight spell and shot through the mist. Ahead, I saw Naga and Medio carrying a log. Tied to that log was a member of the Sea-Sea People.

"Wait right there!" I landed in front of them.

"Oh! You're safe! We were so worried!" Medio said, grinning while carrying his end of the log. "The water started churning and this creature and Naga-dono floated right up! Do you know what this is!?"

"I know exactly what it is," I said. "It's Cremia, of the Sea-Sea People."

"How... do you know my name?" the girl on the log whispered in shock.

"EXACTLY!" Medio shouted, veins nearly popping in his forehead. "This is it! The legendary Sea-Sea People! Proof that the race thought to be extinct still lives in this lake! This is the ultimate scoop!"

"Yeah... about that scoop. I'm gonna need you to act like it never happened."

Medio's face darkened with hostility. "Oh? And what do you mean by that?"

"Yeah, Lina!" Naga chimed in. "Thanks to my efforts and this other guy, we've got a massive scoop! There's even talk of a bonus! Are you out of your mind, trying to ruin this!?"

(A bonus... what a beautiful word. My heart wavered for a second, but a promise is a promise.)

"Think about it! If the world finds out about them, they'll be wiped out for real this time!"

"Hmph... you don't understand," Medio adjusted his monocle. "To report the truth, I don't care if a race or two goes extinct! That is true journalism!"

"That makes no sense! I was asked by her friends to help. I can't just stand by!"

"That's a breach of contract!"

"My contract was to 'assist with the investigation'! It didn't say I couldn't release captive Sea-Sea People! So it's not a breach!"

"That’s a ridiculous argument!"

"It's more logical than yours!"

"I think... both of your arguments are pretty ridiculous..." Cremia whispered.

"SHUT UP!" Medio and I yelled in unison.

"Anyway, let her go!"

"Don't make me laugh! Naga-dono! Deal with her! If you do well, I'll increase the bonus! I'm taking this to town!" Medio turned to run with the log.

"Ho-ho-ho-ho! Leave it to me!" Naga stepped in my way.

Our eyes met, sparks flying. Medio dashed past me. I wanted to chase him, but turning my back on Naga was a death wish.

"Naga! Please! Move! ...Is what I'd say if I weren't firing a **Fireball**!"

BOOM!

"Gyaaaaaah!"

Naga was blown away instantly. Hah! Justice always wins!

I turned to chase Medio, but then I felt a chill. I dove to the side just as countless **Ice Arrows** whistled through the space I’d just occupied.

"Ho-ho-ho-ho! If you thought that little blast could defeat the great Naga the White Serpent, you were mistaken!"

Tch! She's back already!? Her recovery speed is getting suspiciously fast lately.

"Please, Naga! Just listen!"

"What are you talking about!? You fired a Fireball without warning—"

"HAVE ANOTHER FIREBALL!"

KABOOM!

Naga went flying again. But this time, she flipped in mid-air and landed perfectly on her feet!

"What!? You neutralized the blast with a breakfall? Are you my sister from back home!?"

"Hmph. I haven't been blown up by you all this time for nothing," Naga flicked her hair back. "Now, Lina! My turn!"

"No thanks!" I said flatly.

"Ho-ho-ho-ho! So you finally realize the difference in our power—"

"**Freeze Arrow.**"

K-CHING!

Before she could finish her gloating, I encased her in a block of ice.

(Hmph. Still an amateur. My sister could dodge a Dragon Slave, seriously. Though if there were more people like my sister in the world, it would be a nightmare.)

I flew after Medio. I caught up easily—it's hard to run fast while carrying a person on a log.

Seeing me, Medio dropped the log and started a chant. From his gestures... was that **Dynast Brass**!? The spell that freezes an opponent in magical ice and shatters them!?

Is he crazy!? That'll kill me!

The only way to stop it was to interrupt the chant. I put on a burst of speed and tackled him like a linebacker.

THUD!

Medio went flying.

"You! What do you think you're doing!?" he groaned, clutching his hip.

"That's my line! You were about to use Dynast Brass!"

"So what!? For a scoop, I'm willing to make a few 'noble sacrifices' out of my temporary employees!"

"You jerk! If that's how it's gonna be, I'm taking Cremia back by force!"

"Interesting! Let's see you try! If you harm me, you're failing your duty as a 'bodyguard'! But if I have to go through you to get my scoop, I will! I'll show you the terror of the media!"

"**Fireball!**" Medio fired first.

He's decent at magic, but his aim is sloppy. I dodged the red sphere easily and cast my own spell.

"**Sleep.**"

Plop.

Medio hit the ground and started snoring immediately.

KABOOM!

His fireball exploded harmlessly far behind me.

Sleep might not be flashy, but it’s more useful than most attack spells. And hey, I removed him "without harming him." No breach of contract!

I cut Cremia’s ropes with my short sword. "Are you okay?"

"Yes... thank you..."

"Let's get back to the lake before he wakes up."

We reached the lake. I saw the frozen Naga still lying there. Looks like a full-body ice casing is too much even for her to recover from instantly.

"Almost there, Cremia!"

Suddenly, a ball of light flew over our heads.

BOOM!

"Kuck-kuck-kuck... did you think that would defeat me, Lina Inverse!?"

It was Medio!

"How!? You should have been out for hours!"

"Hmph! Do you think a reporter who can't handle a little drowsiness could survive in this business? I took a quick nap and I'm refreshed!"

(I... actually can't argue with that logic.)

"Lina! Catch!"

I turned around. Naga had Cremia in a bear hug!

Medio’s fireball wasn't aiming for us—it was to melt the ice on Naga!

"Ho-ho-ho-ho! You really got me earlier, Lina! But I've got your precious friend now! What will you do!?"

I grit my teeth. I couldn't attack while she held a hostage. I had to wait for an

opening.

"Cremia! Try to break free!"

I prepared to lunge, but my plan was unnecessary.

"Understood!" Cremia said.

CRACK.

With a single shrug of her arms, Cremia sent Naga flying into a nearby grove of trees. Naga hit a trunk and went limp.

Medio and I just stared, eyes wide.

"I broke free!" Cremia said cheerfully.

"Y-yeah... good job... you're... stronger than you look."

"It's normal. Sea-Sea People are about two or three times stronger than humans. Earlier, I was tied up before I realized what was happening, so I couldn't do anything."

(Right... the books said 'gentle,' and she looks fragile, but no one ever said they were *weak*.)

"Cremia! Run! To the lake!"

"Yes!" She turned and bolted.

"I won't let you!" Medio tried to chase her. I stepped in his way.

"Naga-dono! Help me!" Medio yelled.

I spun around, expecting Naga to be back, but she was still unconscious in the trees.

It was a trick! Medio dodged past me while I was distracted. He wasn't going to catch her by foot, though.

Then I heard him chanting.

"**Fireball!**"

Is he going to kill her just to have a body to report on!?

"**Freeze Arrow!**"

My blue bolt intercepted his red sphere. They collided and neutralized each other in a flash of steam.

SPLASH!

Cremia dived into the lake and vanished.

"It's over," I muttered, looking at Medio, who was slumped on his knees.

Finding them again in this massive lake would be impossible.

"Over...?" Medio looked at me with a faint smirk. "Don't make me laugh. Even if she escaped, it’s an undeniable fact that Sea-Sea People live here! I will report it! Lina Inverse! Can you stop me!?"

I couldn't. Unless I silenced him permanently, which I wasn't going to do.

"Kuck-kuck-kuck! You see!? In the end, the 'True Media' always wins!"

I could only watch in silence as he walked away, laughing triumphantly.

A few days later, the front page of the *Dryad Spokes* featured his article: **"THE SEA-SEA PEOPLE LIVE! THE PHANTOM RACE SIGHTED AT THE MISTY LAKE!"**

And, as I expected, nothing happened.

"Oh, look, the Dryad Spokes is talking in its sleep again."

"This magazine always cracks me up with these fabrications."

That was the reaction of everyone who read it.

Naturally. Because Medio’s reputation for making things up was so strong, the "Truth" was treated as a joke. The secret of the Sea-Sea People was safe.

Medio never paid me, of course. Naga grumbled about her missing bonus, but I settled that with the emerald from the Sea-Sea People.

"It's true! This time it's really true!"

We left Dryad City, leaving behind the tearful shouts of Medio on a street corner.

(Everything for the Truth: END)

Escape! The Whole Lot of 'Em (Part 1)

Countless glimmers filled the dark night, bathed in the glow of the moon. They were all the reflections of weapons and armor belonging to the soldiers crowding the area. They had surrounded a small castle built atop a massive, monolithic cliff. Behind the castle was a sheer drop-off, and far below that flowed a deep river. On the opposite side—the road leading from the castle to the town—stood thousands of soldiers. They were none other than the Royal Army of this country, the Kingdom of Raltigue.

"Heh. That's quite the army," I murmured nonchalantly, floating in the night sky with a Levitation spell.

"Ho-ho-ho-ho! Don't tell me you've lost your nerve, Lina Inverse?! An army of this level is—"

"Don't start that cackling in this situation!"

Whack!

While she was still clinging to my waist, my elbow strike connected directly with the crown of the screaming Naga's head.

—Save a certain lord.—

The Sorcerers' Association of Demidias City was the one that brought that request to Naga and me. Apparently, a man named Lord Kairas, who held a castle on the outskirts of town, was suspected of rebellion by the King, and his castle was currently besieged by the Royal Army. However, the talk of rebellion was entirely a misunderstanding. Furthermore, this Lord Kairas was originally a man of the magical arts who researched various alternative applications of magic; the Association considered him too valuable to lose.

For all those reasons, the Sorcerers' Association didn't want Kairas to die. Thus, they wanted us to rescue him from inside the besieged castle. That was the gist of the request.

To be perfectly honest, it was an incredibly easy job. I just had to wrap myself in dark clothing, blend into the night, use a Levitation spell to cross the river and enter the castle, and then save this Kairas person using the same method. Done.

Of course, there were plenty of people in the Sorcerers' Association who could use a

simple Levitation spell, and surely others had thought of the same method I did. But since the opponent was the King himself, the Association couldn't move directly, which was why the job had been passed to us.

And so, Naga and I were currently approaching Lord Kairas's castle through the air, intending to infiltrate it. ...Well, there was an argument to be made that it was pointless to bring Naga—who could use Raywing but not Levitation—but she had been right there when I took the request, so I had no choice. She demanded a piece of the profit and threatened to blab to the Royal Army if I refused.

At that point, it was useless to argue. Even if I tried to silence her by blowing her away with a Dragon Slave, Naga would absolutely find a way to return. It was slightly better to bring her along as a bit of a burden than to have her come back and interfere later. That said, I knew I was in for a headache if she started that high-pitched cackling in this situation. Clutching the now-limp head of the unconscious Naga, I slowly descended toward the castle.

"I'm sorry, but—I must refuse."

"...Huh...?"

Naga and I both let out blank, stupid-sounding voices at the same time. We were in a small guest parlor in the castle, and those were the first words out of Lord Kairas's mouth after we finished explaining the situation. He looked to be in his early forties—a rather handsome middle-aged guy whose black hair and beard were just starting to be peppered with white. ...But still, I never imagined he would refuse an escape attempt out of hand.

"Hmph! And what is the reason for this...?" After a brief silence, Naga brushed back her hair with a flourish. "If you are worried about the fee, there is no need! We have already been paid by the Sorcerers' Association. —Though, if you wish to offer a separate reward, we have no reason to refuse."

"Who is talking about rewards? Who?" Lord Kairas waved his hands dismissively with a troubled expression. "My refusal is not for such a reason. I am grateful for the Association's—and your—kindness. Certainly, as you described, sneaking me out with Levitation would likely go unnoticed by the Royal Army. However... if that succeeds, what happens to the soldiers left behind in this castle?"

"—Ah—!"

I let out a sound at his words. He was right.

"If I were to slip away and the Royal Army didn't realize it, they would still launch an

attack on this castle. Even if the soldiers here surrendered, once the army realized I wasn't here, they might torture my men to find my whereabouts. In the end, if I escape alone, I am abandoning the soldiers in this castle. I cannot do that. Therefore, I refuse to be rescued alone. However—" Lord Kairas leaned forward slightly. "If you can save everyone in this castle, that is a different story. No, if you can do that, I will reward you as much as you like."

"As much as we like?!" Naga and I shouted in unison.

"Well, even 'as much as you like' has its limits... but I should have assets worth about ten or twenty thousand gold coins."

"Ten or twenty thousand?!"

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!"

That was incredible! ...Though, that was only if we accepted and succeeded. I couldn't get ahead of myself before hearing the details.

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!"

...Well, ignoring the person next to me who was losing her mind with laughter...

"So... you say 'everyone in the castle,' but how many people are there total?"

"Hmm... it’s not a massive number, but there should be roughly a hundred and twenty or thirty soldiers."

"A hundred and thirty?!" I echoed again.

Hmm. If the number were small, I could carry them out one or two at a time with Levitation, but the river behind the castle was wide enough to fit a small town. Given the slow speed of Levitation, it would take forever to move everyone. The longer it took, the higher the chance of being spotted by the Royal Army. If we weren't done by dawn, we’d definitely be discovered.

"Then the problem is... the method..."

"Ho-ho-ho-ho! Why hesitate, Lina Inverse?! If you cannot do it, perhaps you should leave it to me, Naga the White Serpent?! Decisions must be followed by action! I shall go out there right now and take care of a company or two of the Royal Army myself!"

"Wait just a minute!" Lord Kairas shouted at Naga as she turned to leave. "Do not touch the Royal Army! If you do, there will be no reward!"

Stop.

The phrase 'no reward' worked like a charm, and Naga froze in her tracks.

"It is true that I am currently misunderstood by the King as having rebellious intent," Kairas explained. "That is why I am in this predicament. But if I draw my bow against the Royal Army just because I am cornered, I will become a true rebel. Not just me, but everyone in this castle. I cannot turn them into traitors. So! Do not lay a finger on the Royal Army!"

"...But speaking of which, Lord Kairas, you say it's a 'misunderstanding,' but how did that happen? If we could clear the misunderstanding, everything would be fine."

"—Well—actually—" Lord Kairas looked off into the distance. "I studied a bit of magic in my youth. Magic is fun and versatile, but it is largely dependent on one's innate talent. Anyone can use a Lighting spell if they chant it, but higher-level spells aren't so simple. I've heard that a Fireball from a master can melt rock, but an ordinary sorcerer would be lucky to leave a scorch mark. Therefore! I was researching the fusion of magic and physical technology! —On that day—what I showed the King was one of the results of that research."

He let out a sigh.

"I took a metal cylinder closed at one end, put a round iron ball inside, and triggered a Fireball in the space between the ball and the closed end. The explosion would launch the iron ball and crush the target."

"Heh. That sounds pretty interesting."

"Right? Right? I love this sort of thing. If only the projectile hadn't directly hit the King's chambers..."

"Hey now..."

...It hit? Directly?

"Ah, no, no. Of course, His Majesty and the Royal Family were unharmed... but I realized that was a bit bad..."

"That's not 'a bit,' that's 'very' bad... To be honest, you couldn't complain even if you were executed on the spot for that..."

"Yes. In fact, I came to the same conclusion. I grabbed my subordinates and made a dash for it."

.....

Well... you can't really complain about being treated as a rebel after that... Clearing

a 'misunderstanding' like that was going to be impossible.

"—Do you think... something can be done?"

"Hmm..." I crossed my arms as the Lord looked at me anxiously. "...Well, let's give it a shot!"

"Oh! Really! You'll do it?!" His face brightened.

"Hmph! Then it is decided! Naga the White Serpent shall go and—"

CLONK!

"I told you not to defeat them! Listen to people when they talk!" The crown Lord Kairas threw hit Naga square in the face.

"...So, Miss Lina, what is the plan?"

"Hmm..." I leaned in, holding up my right index finger. "First—we buy time."

"Listen well, all of you!"

Atop the cliff leading to Lord Kairas's castle, a man's resonant voice rang out through the clear morning mist.

"The time has come to strike down the traitor Lord Kairas, who has made an enemy of our King, Raltigue XI!"

The man shouting in front of the soldiers was clad in silver armor. Likely a general or something similar.

"The enemy is inside the castle, and I hear they use strange magical technologies! Do not let your guard down! However! They are few in number! If we attack with courage, we will not be defeated!"

"Courage alone won't win this!"

...*Whisper, whisper*...

A stir went through the ranks as a voice interrupted the General.

"—Who goes there?!" the General barked toward the source—me—as I walked slowly up from the base of the cliff.

"Charging in blindly is dangerous. After all, there's a terrifying sorcerer in that castle."

"I asked who you are!" A few nearby soldiers surrounded me, taking up positions.

I stopped and looked at them. "Lina Inverse... perhaps some of you have heard of me."

"What?!?!?!"

A massive commotion erupted among the soldiers following the General's exaggerated shout.

"...You mean, you're *the*—?!"

"The 'Engacho' Sorceress!"

"The Flat-Chested Lina Inverse?!"

"Oh! Her appearance is just like the rumors!"

"...Hold on, you guys." I couldn't help but snap at the soldiers talking nonsense. ...Maybe I *should* just blow them all away with a Dragon Slave right now...

"...S-So...?" The General asked, his complexion shifting slightly. "Why is that flat-chested... I mean, why are you here?"

"I'm going to knock you flat if you say that again."

"Ah! No, no! There was no ill intent! Forgive me!" the General stammered. "M-More importantly. You said there is a terrifying sorcerer in that castle?"

"Yeah... the opponent who has given me the most trouble in my entire career," I said in a heavy tone.

At least up to this point, I wasn't lying. Naga was in that castle, after all. She was definitely a 'terrifying' sorcerer, and as an 'ally,' she had certainly given me the most trouble. Of course, I was intentionally phrasing things to be misleading, and I was about to lie a whole lot more.

"I chased that person all the way here... and then, I found out." I pointed a finger sharply at the castle. "That they are—in that castle!"

A wave of unease rippled through the soldiers.

"...Are... are you saying we can't win?!" the General asked, half in fear and half in stubbornness.

I shook my head slowly. "I wouldn't say that. But... if you fight them head-on, there will definitely be massive casualties..."

"...Urrgh..."

"So, I have a proposal. Why don't we—team up?"

I made my move as the General groaned with a troubled face. Yes. This was the first stage of the plan. Infiltrate as an 'ally' and delay the attack. I made sure not to say 'you guys can't win on your own.' If I said that and bruised their pride, they'd just get stubborn and refuse to cooperate.

"I won't act like I'm doing you a favor. If I'm dealing with that sorcerer, I won't have the luxury of worrying about the castle's soldiers. I'll take down the sorcerer, and you take down the soldiers. How about that?"

"Hmm..." The General put a hand to his chin.

"There is no need to worry, General!" A loud voice rang out as a middle-aged, bearded man in armor stepped forward from the group. Judging by how he spoke to the General, he was likely a staff officer or a captain.

"No need to worry? What do you mean, Captain Ezeil?"

"The King ordered *us* to suppress the traitors! Therefore, we should fulfill our duty with our own strength! To borrow help to take down a tiny castle with only a hundred soldiers would be a disgrace to the Royal Army! Besides, we have sorcerers in our ranks as well!"

It was true; an army of this size usually brought sorcerers who could use attack spells. However...

"Let me ask you something," I said. "Can your sorcerers take down a dragon... or even a giant hydra... with a single spell?"

"With a single spell?!" Captain Ezeil shouted.

The General answered in his place. "...Hmm... a single spell would be impossible..."

"For that person... it's a piece of cake," I said flatly.

"If that is true... they are a formidable foe indeed..." the General muttered to himself.

Good. He's leaning my way.

"Wait, General!" Captain Ezeil interjected again. "It is doubtful whether such a sorcerer truly exists in that castle! —In the first place—" The Captain shot a hostile glance at me. "Is this person truly Lina Inverse? Even if she is, there is no guarantee she isn't a spy sent by the enemy."

Ack! He was sharp. However, if I lost my cool or made frantic excuses here, he'd only get more suspicious.

"Believe whatever you want," I said with a calm, composed tone. "Even if I say 'trust me,' people who want to doubt will doubt. I'll leave the decision to the General."

"...Hmm..." The General fell silent for a moment. "—Understood. Miss Lina, we would be honored to have your assistance."

"General?!"

"—Listen, Ezeil—" The General spoke to the protesting Captain in a quiet, reasoning tone. "Even if she were a spy, the victory of our army would not be shaken by a single person. If we find out she is a spy, we can simply cut her down then. Conversely, if what she says is true... our army will suffer great losses. You mentioned honor before the King, but wouldn't losing the army he entrusted to us be a far greater disgrace than borrowing help?"

"...T-That...!"

Just as Ezeil was at a loss for words—

BOOM!

A flashy explosion echoed through the area.

"Ho-ho-ho-ho! You've finally tracked me down, Lina Inverse!"

A high-pitched cackle rang out, shaking the air and rattling brains. Everyone turned toward the voice and saw a single figure standing atop the branch of a nearby cedar tree. Was she a servant of evil or a messenger from hell? Clad in a black mantle and hair fluttering in the breeze, it was an incredibly suspicious costume! For some reason, she was wearing a weird mask this time, but her identity was obvious to anyone who knew her: Naga the White Serpent!

"...W-What is that?!"

"How strange!"

"When did they get there?!"

"But it seems your time has finally run out!" Naga's voice boomed over the confused soldiers. "To think you cannot even face me without the help of these nobodies... you've certainly grown cowardly!"

"Nobodies?!" Ezeil barked in anger. "How dare you mock our army! General! That—"

"Wait!" I cut him off. "If you attack blindly, you'll be hit by a counterattack! Leave this to me!"

"Leave it to you?!"

Ignoring all protests, I chanted a spell. "Raywing!"

Using the high-speed flight spell, I flew past Naga and headed down toward the base of the cliff.

Hmph! Afraid, Lina Inverse?! Because of the wind barrier, I couldn't hear her, but she was likely shouting something like that. It was part of the script, after all. Naga followed suit, using the same Raywing spell to chase after me. After flying around for a bit until the Royal Army was out of sight, I deactivated the spell and landed.

"So? Is it going well?" Naga asked as she landed nearby.

"Yeah, seems like it. ...Setting that aside, why on earth are you wearing that suspicious mask?"

I mean, adding 'suspicious' to someone who was already peak-suspicious didn't change much, but still.

"Hmph. To not understand the meaning of this mask... you are still green, Lina Inverse. It is a disguise to keep my face from being known, obviously!"

"...A... disguise...?" I frowned.

Naga boasted proudly, "This time, I am playing the role of the sorcerer defying the Royal Army. If I showed my face and happened to run into one of them after this is over, my identity would be compromised! To prevent that, I am wearing this mask!"

...Well, given her usual outfit, I felt like the mask wouldn't make a bit of difference...

"...F-Fine... anyway—"

"Hmph. Let's make it flashy."

Naga and I began chanting spells simultaneously.

"Fireball!"

KABOOM!

"Mega Brand!"

CRACKLE-THOOM!

Our flashy attack spells exploded repeatedly against empty ground. It was the secret technique: an attack that looks like a fierce battle from a distance! Eventually, I said, "Okay Naga, it’s about time. Just as we planned."

"Hmph. Understood." Naga chanted "Raywing!" and took to the sky again. I followed shortly after.

Naga headed back toward Lord Kairas’s castle, and I returned to the Royal Army. When I got back, just as we planned, the soldiers looked completely pale, likely terrified by the spells we had been firing off.

"...M-Miss Lina, was that...?" the General asked in a trembling voice.

I nodded solemnly. "Yes. That’s the sorcerer I’m hunting."

"Then... why didn't you finish them?! No, if you can use spells like that, why not just blow up the castle?" Captain Ezeil asked, still with a hint of suspicion in his eyes despite his pale face.

I shook my head. "The enemy is likely thinking the same thing. The castle is probably rigged with magical traps. Flashy long-range spells would be a waste. —In the first place, if they were someone who could be handled that easily, I would have taken them down long ago. ...You still seem to doubt me... but if I were an enemy, I wouldn't bother sneaking into your army. I’d just fire flashy attack spells at you from a distance."

"...Hmm..."

"Indeed... that makes sense," the General said, extending his hand. "Miss Lina Inverse. We look forward to your cooperation."

"—Likewise—" I said, shaking his hand.

And so, the first stage of the mission to rescue Lord Kairas and his entire group was a success. ...Though, I didn't think for a second that Captain Ezeil trusted me completely...

Sit up.

Inside a small tent, I quietly sat up. It was the next morning—or rather, the time when the eastern sky was just starting to turn gray. After the previous events, I had forced the General into a series of pointless meetings to 'plan the strategy,' wasting the entire day with 'this and that.' The Royal Army had moved away from the castle and set up camp near a forest with a good view. I was sleeping alone in a small tent the

army had lent me.

There was no sign of anyone outside. I peeked through the entrance. Sentries were stationed here and there, but they seemed drowsy and hadn't noticed me in the dark.

Alright.

I slipped out of the tent and headed deep into the forest. I was scheduled to meet Naga by a small lake to coordinate our plans. However...

"...This is bad..." I whispered to myself shortly after I started walking.

Ever since I entered the forest, I felt a presence following me, keeping a steady distance.

I'm being tailed.

It was likely Captain Ezeil's doing... but I couldn't lead a tail to the meeting spot. On the other hand, if I knocked the person out, I'd be declaring myself an enemy.

So... what now?!

(Escape! The Whole Lot of 'Em: To be continued!)

Next Episode Preview

How will I shake off my tail? And will the plan to rescue the entire castle truly succeed?! Since brute force alone won't solve this request, how will I settle things?! Lina Inverse!

Next time: **"Escape! The Whole Lot of 'Em!" (Part 2)**.

If you don't read it, I'll go on a rampage! (Whoa. That part was totally influenced by the TV show! Sorry to everyone in regions where it doesn't air!)

Escape! The Whole Lot of 'Em (Part 2)

Synopsis

The castle perched atop the cliff was surrounded by the Royal Army. Having been asked to evacuate every single person inside, Naga and I immediately moved to execute our plan! I slipped into the Royal Army's ranks by pretending to be an ally, working hard to buy us some time.

However, as I headed off to secretly contact Naga, someone started tailing me! Could it be one of Captain Ezeil's men, the guy who suspects me of being a spy?! If I take down the pursuer here, my cover will blown for sure! So, what's the move?! Lina Inverse?!

The lake where I was supposed to meet Naga was already right under my nose.

—Alright! If that's how it's gonna be!

Having made up my mind, I dove deep into the thicket. Almost immediately after:

Rustle.

The bushes a short distance away shook, and a single young man emerged. He wasn't wearing armor or a sword, but from his clothes and general bearing, it wasn't hard to guess his identity. He was likely one of the soldiers under Captain Ezeil's command. He might have been a decent soldier, but as a tail, he was still green! He peered around restlessly, searching for any sign of me.

—And right then—

"Freeze Arrow!"

My strike came flying in!

"What?!"

However, with movements more agile than I expected, he instinctively leaped away and hid in a nearby thicket.

Hmph! Weak! To think you can hide from me with just that!

I muttered a spell under my breath and slammed my hand against a tree trunk.

"Freeze Tendril!"

A single spiral of ice extended from my hand, and the moment it touched the man

who thought he was hidden—

Kachiiiing!

In an instant, he was frozen solid.

—*Alright. Okay.*

Leaving the man where he was, I resumed my trek toward the lake where Naga was supposed to be waiting.

"Hmph. You're late, Lina Inverse."

Beside the small lake covered in morning mist and green trees, Naga was waiting for me, leaning against a tree with her arms crossed.

"Yeah, well, someone still suspects me. I got followed part of the way by a guy who's probably one of his subordinates."

"—And what about the one who followed you?"

"Oh, don't worry. I froze him back there—just enough so he won't die."

"Hmm."

Naga gave a half-hearted acknowledgement as I waved my hand and spoke in a breezy tone.

"—So, Naga, how's the progress on your end? I can't keep buying time forever over here."

"Hmph. There's no need to worry about that." With a flourish, Naga swept her mantle aside. "The work is complete. We're ready to go whenever."

"Ready to go?!" I echoed.

"Well... thanks to that, I was up all night. But for a simple task like that, a single night is more than enough for Naga the White Serpent. Ho-ho—"

"Stop the cackling."

Predicting the exact moment the laugh would erupt, I muffled Naga's mouth with my right hand. ...Still, for someone who supposedly pulled an all-night session, her energy level hasn't dropped a bit. As expected of Naga. She's not human.

"...But Naga. You did it properly, didn't you? If we actually try it and it turns out it doesn't work, 'sorry' isn't gonna cut it."

"Hmph. Lina, it seems you don't understand the saying 'the significance is in the challenge.'"

"That's! What! I'm! Saying! Whether there's significance or not, if we don't succeed, there's no reward! You get that, right?!"

"...Hmph. Now that you mention it, I suppose that's true."

Naga answered while striking a pose and brushing back her hair, but I noticed a single bead of sweat rolling down her cheek.

...Is she gonna be okay...? Is this really gonna be okay...? This girl...

"...W-Well... if the preparations are done, we're doing this today! Around evening, just like we discussed—how does that sound?"

"Hmph. Fine by me."

"Right... Just as we discussed—"

The two of us gave a firm nod to each other, and Naga turned on her heel and vanished into the forest. I, on the other hand, still had a little something left to do here. Making sure no one was around, I took off my sword and mantle.

"—What is the meaning of this, Miss Lina Inverse?"

—Just as I expected.—

Waiting for me as I returned to the Royal Army camp were the General, his soldiers, and Captain Ezeil, who wore a smug, triumphant grin. Among them was the face of the young man who had tailed me.

"—The meaning of... what?"

I didn't panic or make a scene; instead, I boldly questioned him back. That must have annoyed Captain Ezeil, as a vein practically popped on his forehead.

"Don't play dumb! Don't tell me you don't recognize this soldier's face!" He pointed sharply at the man.

"...Oh. The guy who was tailing me earlier. —And?"

"It's not 'and'!"

Seeing that I remained unfazed, Captain Ezeil's face flushed with rage. "This man is my subordinate! Do you understand?! In other words, you suddenly attacked my

subordinate and froze him! I'd like to hear a proper reason for why you did such a thing! —Or perhaps—" He flashed a gloating smile. "Did you slip out of camp for a reason you can't talk about here?"

Siiiiiiiiigh...

In response, I let out a heavy, annoyed sigh.

"—I know you suspect me... and I'm sure it was your order for that guy to tail me... BUT! That doesn't give him the right to stand there and watch me bathe!"

"Wa...!?"

Captain Ezeil looked momentarily taken aback by my words.

"Yeah! I wouldn't go so far as to call it a bath, but I slipped out to at least wash off with some water! He's the one who went sneaking after me, so he's got no right to complain about getting blasted!"

Taking advantage of his hesitation, I pressed my advantage all at once.

"...Washing off... you say?"

"That's right."

"Hmm... her hair certainly does look damp," the General noted, nodding as he looked at me.

Naturally it was damp. After my meeting with Naga, I had actually washed off, both to rinse away the sweat and to set up this very excuse.

"...W-Well, you could have just said so..."

At Ezeil's weakened tone, I turned my gaze toward the soldier who had followed me.

"—Let me ask you—if I had told you, 'I'm going to go wash off now, so don't follow me,' would you have stayed behind?"

"...T-That... well..." The soldier shot a quick, timid glance at Captain Ezeil. "...It was... an order..."

"—Figures."

I shifted my gaze back to Ezeil. "That's how it is. The only way to stop him was to do what I did. —Unless what? Are you saying I should have just sat there and let him watch?"

"...O-Oof! If you really wanted to clear your name, you should have just endured that

much!"

Driven by desperation, Captain Ezeil started spouting total nonsense.

I'm gonna snap!

"You don't have a single shred of delicacy in you, do you?! How can someone so insensitive even be a 'Captain'?! ...I bet you only got promoted because you're good at fighting, but with that personality, I bet your wife and kids treat you like a nuisance back home, don't they?!"

"Y-You...! How dare you say such things so bluntly!"

...Wait, did I hit the nail on the head?

"A washbasin would have been plenty for someone like you!"

"Are you joking?! There's no way I'm bathing in a place surrounded by nothing but men!"

"Shut up! Who would even enjoy peeking at someone with a chest that looks neither like a man's nor a woman's?!"

Snap.

"Dill Brand!"

KABOOM!

"...Ezeil... I think you were in the wrong just now... truly..."

The General murmured to himself as he watched Captain Ezeil soar high into the sky thanks to my spell.

"Ho-ho-ho-ho! You seem to be in quite a pinch, Lina Inverse!"

Naga's resonant voice echoed through the area that evening—just as I was in the middle of a fruitless strategy meeting with the Royal Army brass inside the command tent.

"That voice!" I shouted, standing up and rushing out of the tent. The others followed suit.

"If you are so terrified of me that you cannot move, you should never have followed me in the first place! —Or is it the Royal Army that is too paralyzed by fear to act?!"

The voice was clear, but she was nowhere to be seen; Naga's words merely echoed

among the trees. Naga, hidden in the forest, was using a 'Wind' element spell I had taught her to make her voice project everywhere.

"...W-What was that?!"

"Show yourself, coward!"

The Royal Army officers were incensed by her words.

"Hmph. If I am to be called a coward by cowards, I suppose I have no choice but to emerge. ...Besides, I've grown bored of this standoff. It might be a good time to settle this!"

With that, Naga's voice cut out. And then—

Rumble, rumble, rumble!

The earth shook with a heavy vibration.

"W-What is it?!"

"An earthquake?!"

While the soldiers were panicking, the earth swelled and shifted; stones and soil gathered together, forming the shape of a giant bird!

Cawwwwww!

The bird golem created by Naga's spell let out a cry toward the heavens.

—In our meeting, the plan was for me to crush Naga's golem with a single strike, and then confront Naga herself when she appeared. In the past, Naga had shown off her "skills" by creating stone dolls with terrible proportions or stone dragons that went on a rampage, so I was worried she'd lose control here. I had strictly warned her not to summon anything that would go haywire—but this was the first time I'd seen a bird golem. And surprisingly! This one actually had good proportions and looked pretty cool!

Hmm. Maybe she's grown a little. Naga.

While I was inwardly impressed:

"E-Enemy attack! Swords and arrows are useless! Call the sorcerers!"

The General's voice rang out, and the units began moving frantically.

"—There's no need for that!"

I stepped forward boldly and confronted Naga’s bird golem.

Skreeeeeeee!

The bird golem let out a cry as if to intimidate me, spread its wings, and took a step forward!

In that split second!

C-Crack!

With an incredibly loud sound, the bird golem’s legs snapped effortlessly.

Skree-kree-kree-ruuuu?!

Thud!

The bird collapsed right there and then, flapping its wings pathetically.

.....

A heavy, awkward silence filled the air.

...Well... if you think about it, if you make a bird the size of a house out of rock and soil with realistic proportions, those thin legs aren't gonna hold up... and obviously, it’s too heavy to fly...

The bird golem flapped its wings for a while as everyone watched, but soon enough, it fell apart on its own and stopped moving.

...Uhhh...

"...I have to ask... is that sorcerer you’re chasing really that formidable...?"

"...Uhh... hmm..."

At Captain Ezeil’s jab, I could only groan.

—And right then—

"Ho-ho-ho-ho! To break my spell so easily, it seems you’re at least somewhat capable, Lina Inverse!"

That was Naga’s scripted line!

Read the room and improvise a little, you idiot...

But I couldn't exactly give her acting notes right now! Left with no choice, I followed the script too.

"If you think you can defeat me with something like that, you’re dead wrong! Stop playing around and get serious!"

"Hmph... then I suppose I shall do just that..."

Along with the voice, a single shadow appeared at the edge of the forest.

"...You finally showed yourself..."

Under the watchful eyes of the Royal Army, I and the masked Naga finally faced off.

"Freeze Arrow!"

The opening shot of the battle (the staged one) was fired by Naga.

Zip-zip-zip-zip!

"Aaaaah!"

Soldiers scattered like baby spiders to avoid the dozen or so arrows of cold light. Amidst them, I was the only one standing calmly. By the time Naga fired the Freeze Arrows, I had already deployed a wind barrier as planned. I blew the arrows away and dispelled the barrier.

The sounds of our chanting echoed under the sky, which was beginning to turn the color of the sunset. And then—both spells were completed at the same moment.

"Fireball!"

"Freeze Arrow!"

The two orbs of light, red and blue, collided right between us.

Krr-shhh!

They interfered with each other and vanished into the void. At the same time, I began chanting another spell and dashed toward Naga!

"Damu Brass!"

As I fired the blast, she leaped backward—

Trip!

She must have tripped on a tree root, because she fell flat on her butt!

Wait, it’s gonna hit!

The moment I almost screamed:

Swoosh!

Instantly, Naga pulled a knife from behind her waist and parried my spell away.

...Oh. I completely forgot, but I think that knife of hers is some kind of magic sword. Still... that was bad for my heart.

"Hmph! D-D-Don't think you can defeat me with an attack like that!"

Naga spoke as she stood up, but her voice and knees were shaking.

...Yeah, she was scared too...

As I thought that, I was already closing in on her. I unsheathed my short sword and slashed at her.

...Normally, Naga was supposed to pull her knife here...

Clang!

Anyway, Naga's knife caught my strike. We locked blades, and Naga began chanting. Seeing the spell was ready, she gave me a wink. Keeping the swords locked, I crouched down as if being overpowered. Simultaneously—

"Freeze Arrow!"

In response to Naga's 'Words of Power,' a dozen arrows of cold appeared above my head. They flew right past me toward the Royal Army behind me.

"Whoaaa!"

The soldiers screamed again. The encirclement of soldiers, who had been creeping closer to support me, widened once more.

Clink!

After confirming that, I pushed her knife back with my sword and stood up.

—If I didn't stay between Naga and the Royal Army, there was a risk the archers would fire at her. ...Well... I didn't think ten or twenty arrows would actually kill someone like Naga, but you never know. If that happened, the whole plan would go up in smoke.

"...How is it? About time?"

While faking the blade-lock, Naga whispered to me. I shot a glance at the western sky.

"...Yeah. Let's move. As flashily as possible."

At my answer, Naga began chanting. Eventually, she leaped far back.

"Raywing!"

Just like yesterday, she flew along the trees of the forest using the high-speed flight spell. Her target—Lord Kairas's castle atop the cliff.

"Don't let them escape! Take them down!"

Under the General's orders, arrows and flaming bolts from the army's sorcerers flew toward Naga. Most missed, and those that hit were blown away by the wind barrier she wore.

"Don't interfere! I'll handle this! If you don't want to get caught in the crossfire, stay here!"

With that, I chanted the same high-speed flight spell and chased after Naga.

K-Boom!

The red flames of attack spells flashed, outshining the crimson sunset. The stage for our magical battle shifted to the immediate vicinity of Lord Kairas's castle. From the base of the cliff, the Royal Army watched our fight.

—*Alright. Almost...*

I signaled Naga with my eyes. We moved apart, faced each other, and chanted—

"Burst Flare!"

"Van Rehl!"

The two spells we fired—fire and ice—exploded!

K-BOOOOOM!

Light flashed and wind whirled. The heat and cold collided, instantly creating a thick fog.

—The strongest fire attack spell and the strongest ice attack spell. When these two collide, they create a flashy sound, a flash of light, and an incredibly thick cloud of smoke, but the destructive power itself is neutralized. There are probably very few sorcerers who know this.

Thanks to the smoke, we were hidden from the Royal Army's view. In that opening, Naga dashed toward the castle. I, on the other hand, walked slowly down toward the base of the cliff.

From the perspective of the Royal Army, Naga and I had faced off and fired powerful spells at each other—and just as they were growing anxious about what happened in the smoke, I emerged calmly from the mist.

Oooooh!

A small stir went through the soldiers.

"Is it over?!"

At the General's question, I shook my head. "They escaped. Into that castle. Right at the last second."

"Then now is the time for the entire army to—"

"There's no need for that."

I turned on my heel and faced the castle. "The enemy is weakened. And likely... so is the magical barrier they set up. —Now—I can end it!"

With that, I chanted the spell—

"DRAGON SLAVE!"

KABOOOOM!

The strike blew away the smoke and caused the small castle atop the cliff to explode and shatter.

"Whaaaaaaaa!"

The roar of the explosion was joined by the shouts of the soldiers. And then—

Rumble... rumble...

Carrying the rubble of the castle, the foundation cliff slid down into the river behind it with a heavy sound.

"—Sorry about that. I ended up blowing away your prize as well."

In the fading sunset, I shook the General's extended hand.

"No... thanks to you, my army didn't suffer a single casualty. Nothing is more important than that. We are the ones who should be thanking you."

He took a small leather pouch from his coat and handed it to me.

"—It’s not much, but consider it a small token of our gratitude. Please, take it."

"—In that case—don't mind if I do."

I smiled brightly and accepted the pouch. *...Hmm, hmm. Judging by the weight, these are gold coins. I’d guess about twenty of 'em!*

...Well, compared to Lord Kairas’s 'as much as you like,' it might be a pittance, but it’s a person’s duty to take what they’re given!

"...Hey..."

As I was busy tucking the gold into my coat, Captain Ezeil spoke up from the side. He kept his eyes averted awkwardly. "...Look... sorry about... doubting you..."

"—It’s fine. I’m not worried about it."

I gave him a smile.

"—I’m glad to hear that. Well, if fate allows, let's meet again."

And so—the Royal Army, all two thousand of them, departed into the sunset.

"—Alright then..."

I began to move only after making sure the Royal Army had left. The sun had already set, and the blue twilight was shifting into black.

"Raywing!"

I took to the sky and headed from the cliff where the castle had been toward the river. After flying over the incredibly wide river for a while toward the downstream, I saw a giant shadow floating on the surface under the moonlight and stars. At first glance, it looked like a small island, but it wasn't. It was drifting down the river on the gentle current.

—Anyone who didn't know the situation would surely be shocked. After all, a massive rock with the ruins of a castle on top of it was floating down the river. I dispelled the spell and landed on the rock.

"—It’s okay. Everyone’s gone."

"...It seems things went well."

Emerging from the shadow of the rubble into the moonlight was none other than Lord Kairas himself.

"Is everyone safe?"

"...Some were slightly injured by the impact of the fall... but for now, it is nothing serious. The escape was a magnificent success." He beamed at me.

"Well, it was the obvious result," I said boastfully, though I was inwardly breathing a sigh of relief.

—The plan was to teach Naga a tunnel-digging spell (Dug Haut), and while I bought time with the Royal Army, she was to dig tunnels through the massive monolithic rock under the castle to create a large underground cavity. Everyone would evacuate to the basement, and as I blew up the empty castle above, Naga would use magic to cut the cliff away and drop it into the river.

Simply put, we made an improvised boat out of the castle's foundation rock to escape downstream. Theoretically, it should have worked, but Naga was the one doing the basement work. That was my biggest worry. On the other hand, if I had sent her to stall the Royal Army, she might have ended up joining them or being talked into attacking... but somehow, it seems she pulled it off.

"Ho-ho-ho-ho! This is all thanks to me!"

Before I knew it, Naga had appeared right next to me, giving her usual idiotic laugh. "On that note, for the reward split, I'll take six and Lina gets four!"

"...Well, ignoring the ramblings of an idiot..."

"...Lina, you've been so cold lately..." she muttered sadly.

I turned to Lord Kairas and pointed downstream. "—If you keep going like this, you'll cross the border into the Reizell territory before dawn. Have the sorcerers help you bring this to the shore and land."

—This way, we could prevent a situation where they were spotted fleeing by Raltigue soldiers.

"After that—whether you seek protection from the Sorcerers' Association, hide your identity and settle somewhere, or wait for things to blow over before returning, it's up to you—"

"—Yes—you've truly fulfilled my reckless wish. I am in your debt. I thank you. —Now, about the reward..."

"Yes!"

Naga and I leaned in at the same time, our voices perfectly synchronized. Lord Kairas

looked at us and said flatly:

"It blew up with the castle."

Freeze.

Naga and I both stiffened.

"...It was in the castle's treasury, but your spell's strike—well..."

"Wh-What...?! Why didn't you move it to the basement?! You had plenty of time for that!"

As I snapped at him, Lord Kairas looked troubled. "What are you talking about? I wasn't told the details of the escape; you two were just doing things on your own... Then Miss Naga suddenly showed up and said, 'I made a basement, get in quick.' We didn't have time to move the gold."

.....

I slowly turned my head and glared at Naga. Naga was also staring at me with a look of utter despair.

"...Naga... didn't you... explain the plan...?"

"...Lina... weren't *you* the one explaining it...?"

.....

After a long—

Very long silence—

"NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!"

Our two screams echoed across the night river.

(Escape! The Whole Lot of 'Em: End)

Wild Ride! The Stagecoach! (Part 1)

"Dill Brand!"

K-BOOOOOM!

Along with the echoing roar of the explosion, three thug-like men went spinning high into the air. Thus, the thugs who had called out to me in the middle of town reached the end of their brief appearance.

—Up to this point, it was business as usual. A common seasonal sight, so to speak.

However—

"You there!"

What was slightly different from usual was that someone called out to my back just as I was fluttering my mantle to walk away.

—Still more of them?—

Thinking as much, I shot a quick glance over my shoulder. There stood a sturdy, red-haired middle-aged guy who looked to be in his thirties. To my surprise, he suddenly bowed his head toward me.

"Please! I'll pay! I'll pay you, so please be my customer!"

"…Huh…?"

At those nonsensical words, I let out a dumbfounded cry.

"—First, I suppose, an introduction is in order."

After leading me to his living room, the man spoke these as his opening words.

The house of the man who had suddenly accosted me on the street was located on the outskirts of this town—Delazac City. He seemed to be quite wealthy; the house was large, several carriages were parked in the yard, and people who looked like servants were wandering about. Yet, somehow, the place lacked vitality.

"My name is Roberts Dinbolt. I am the head of the stagecoach association that connects this town with the town of Zanir."

—I see. That explains the carriages outside.

"From the looks of it, you’re a traveling sorcerer… I’m asking a favor because I’ve taken a liking to your skill in blowing those thugs away in a single shot. Please! Ride my carriage as a customer! Of course, I’ll pay you a proper reward!"

"…Ride a carriage… you say?"

Still not understanding the meaning, I instinctively knitted my brows.

"The truth is, there is another stagecoach association in this town. A man named Lambard is the head of that one. Until a while ago, there was only one association, but after the previous head passed away, it split into two—a typical internal feud. Personally, I intended to just continue business as usual, but it seems they weren't content to ignore us. They’ve started playing petty tricks on us. Thanks to that, our carriages are getting smashed and our horses can't run. We’re at our wit's end."

"I see. But in that case, I’d think you could just report them to the officials or something."

I spoke while tilting my cup of aromatic tea, but Mr. Roberts slowly shook his head.

"...If it were that easy, we wouldn't be struggling. Their method is this: while our carriage is running, one of theirs suddenly comes up from behind and starts running alongside us. There are people sitting in the seats of the opponent's carriage—and those people suddenly launch an attack on ours. Our carriage is totaled. If we complain later, they just say, 'The customer did it on their own. You probably did something to anger that customer before, didn't you?' It’s obvious they’re hiring thugs to pretend to be customers and attack us, but even if we report it to the officials, they’ll just make slippery excuses and let it end in uncertainty. In that case! An eye for an eye! Thugs against thugs!"

"Hold it right there, old man."

"—Ah. No, no, my apologies. I didn't mean that a traveling sorcerer is the same as some random thug or anything like that."

"....."

Mr. Roberts gave an excuse that didn't help at all and cleared his throat.

"Anyway. Because of that, I want you to ride our carriage as a customer, and if the opponent's carriage shows up, you launch a surprise attack..."

"...Hmm..."

At Mr. Roberts’ words, I leaned my chin on my hand and fell into thought for a moment.

"Of course, I intend to pay you well. Fifty gold coins—I don't think you’d have any complaints with that?"

It certainly wasn't a bad price. But...

"The problem is the method. With that plan, we can't do anything until the opponent takes the bait, right?"

"That’s true... do you have a better idea?"

"The quickest way would be... if we know where their headquarters is, we just barge in and blast them with attack magic..."

"What are you, a terrorist?" Mr. Roberts shot back with a harsh critique. "First of all! If you cause such a huge scene in the middle of town, both you and we will be caught by the officials in an instant!"

—It’s fine. Once I get the reward, I’m getting the heck out of this town.—

I swallowed those words just as they reached the tip of my tongue. Mr. Roberts cleared his throat again.

"Don't worry, they will definitely fall for our trap. They want to crush us and monopolize the profits as soon as possible, so they won't be looking for a war of attrition."

"One more problem. Even if we lure them into a trap and blow them away, it’s fine if they learn their lesson. But if they get stubborn and retaliate again, we’ll just be stuck in a pointless, endless struggle..."

"If Lambard realizes it's pointless, that’s enough. If his side suffers damage too, he’ll realize how futile this is. After that, it’ll be down to negotiations—a political settlement through smooth talking. I intend to settle things somehow."

"—I see—if that’s the case, I’ll take the job!"

Rumble, rumble, rumble...

The sound of wheels was swallowed into the clear blue sky. Green trees. Chirping birds. My butt hurt.

"Ughhh. Seriously... if I knew it’d be like this, I should’ve prepared a cushion..."

I muttered grumpily with a trembling voice. My voice was trembling, of course, not because of high emotions. It was the shaking. The carriage shook. A lot.

Even if the highway was "well-maintained," it wasn't exactly as smooth as a polished floorboard. It was just gravel and small stones laid down. You can imagine how much a carriage shakes on that. Furthermore, the seats of a stagecoach are little more than wooden boxes covered in straw and cloth. Naturally, there was almost no cushioning.

The result—well, anyone who has ever ridden one doesn't even need to think about it. You can't speak properly, and your butt hurts. If you're prone to motion sickness, you're done for.

Come to think of it, half the reason I didn't use carriages much—besides wanting to save travel money—was for exactly this reason...

"...If we actually reach the town of Zanir safely without the opponent showing up, I'm gonna lose it."

"Don't worry! They'll definitely come!"

The one who shouted back, completely unfazed by the carriage's jolts, was Mr. Roberts, who was acting as the driver.

"Everything is prepared! There's no way they won't fall for this!"

Certainly, as he said, everything was prepared. Mr. Roberts, who had barely touched the reins since becoming the head of the association, was driving, and I was disguised as a nouveau-riche young lady in a wine-red silk dress and gaudy gold accessories.

...Of course, I couldn't ride in my usual sorcerer outfit. If I did that, the trap would be obvious. No one would approach us. But like this, in the opponent's eyes, it would look like Mr. Roberts himself was delivering an important customer.

Even if Lambard suspected a trap, Mr. Roberts was a target they couldn't afford to miss if they wanted to crush him. That being the case, they were bound to attack. All that remained was when, but as for me, I wanted them to attack quickly and get this over with—

"—!"

I twitched my eyebrows slightly. Behind our carriage—a single carriage was gradually closing the gap.

—I see—so that's it—

I casually shifted only my gaze to observe the carriage. The man on the driver's seat

wore a large hat pulled low, hiding his face. The carriage had a folding hood attached, so I couldn't tell if the passengers were people or cargo, but I could guess the contents.

The carriage was proceeding along the highway through the forest. There was no sign of anyone else around.

...I see... a perfect spot for an ambush.

However...!

The carriage behind us gradually closed the gap—and the moment it pulled up alongside us!

"Fireball!"

K-BA-BOOOOM!

A one-hit kill! No questions asked! My spell blew the opponent's carriage deep into the forest!

"Hah! How's that! That's what you get for carelessly approaching me!"

I struck a victory pose atop the jolting carriage.

"—So, it's pretty much like that, Mr. Roberts! I don't know how many carriages they have, but at this rate, I'll just keep blasting them one after another!"

"...That... was our carriage..."

Rumble, rumble, rumble...

At Mr. Roberts' words, which he spoke in a voice that sounded like he was about to cry without even turning around, I froze for a long moment.

"...W-Well... mistakes are a part of life, right...?"

I muttered, shooting a quick glance at Mr. Roberts' back.

Yikes. His back looked so sad.

"L-Look, Mr. Roberts. Even a certain famous person from the past said stuff like, 'Everyone but me is an enemy, death to those who approach'..."

"...How exactly was that person 'famous'...?" Mr. Roberts muttered, still facing away.

"There, there. Besides, if you think about it, I hadn't heard anything about the

features of the opponent's carriage..."

"...You can tell just by looking..."

"Even if you say I can tell just by looking..."

The words I muttered were drowned out by what reached my ears next.

"Fuhahahaha!"

What I suddenly heard was a man's loud, ringing laughter. Looking toward the source—behind us—

"—I see..."

I couldn't help but be convinced.

Two horses wearing barding. The entire surface of the carriage was covered in metal, and the driver was clad in full plate armor. There were even spikes on the wheels.

"Is *that* the carriage of those guys?"

"Yes." Mr. Roberts nodded at my question.

...But... can you really call that a 'carriage'? Usually, without prior knowledge, you'd call it a full-blown tank.

...Well, certainly, as Mr. Roberts said, you can tell just by looking...

And in that tank—er, carriage—in the passenger area, a half-naked man covered from head to toe in tattoo-like patterns was standing tall and laughing loudly.

To be honest, he was the type of person I didn't want to get involved with, but in this case, the fact that I couldn't run away was the problem.

"Oh. There's a carriage over there. It's an eyesore. Let's attack it."

"Customer, I'd rather avoid trouble."

The tattooed man and the armored driver exchanged blatant dialogue in a completely monotone, scripted voice. However, they didn't know yet—that this customer was a sorcerer.

I had already proven that I could use spells even on a carriage. I didn't know how skilled the tattooed man was, but once he got close, one spell would be the end.

The tattooed man raised his right hand to eye level, striking a pose like some martial arts stance.

—Wait, does he intend to jump over here?

The opponent's carriage gradually closed the distance. I muttered a spell under my breath, making sure not to bite my tongue—

"Windy Shield!"

The first one to unleash a strike wasn't me, but the tattooed man on the other carriage!

Is this guy a sorcerer?!

Jolt!

The carriage shook violently, buffeted by the strong wind.

"——!"

The vibration momentarily knocked the breath out of me. The spell I was about to chant was interrupted.

—Damn it!

In a panic, I began chanting the spell again. In that time, the opponent's carriage pulled up right alongside us.

"Kuhahaha! How’s business, Roberts?!"

"That voice...! You, Lambard!"

Mr. Roberts cried out in shock at the words of the armored driver. So this guy is the opponent's boss!

"You, why are you doing this?! If you have a complaint, say it to my face!"

"Huh? I wonder what you’re talking about? I’m just driving my carriage. I can’t be held responsible if the customer does something on their own."

Lambard spoke in a tone dripping with mockery.

But! You can only talk like that for now! My spell is almost complete—

Greeee-grind-grind!

Along with a grating sound, sparks flew from beneath the carriage, and another jolt hit us!

Aaaah! The spell was interrupted again!

It wasn't the tattooed man’s doing. He was still frozen in his pose with his right leg raised high, like some suspicious martial artist.

Leaning out and looking down, I saw—an arm.

A hand holding a hacksaw was being pressed against our carriage's axle.

In other words, someone clinging to the bottom of Lambard’s carriage was trying to saw through our axle!

"You’d go this far?! You?!"

"The customer did it!"

"In what world is there a customer clinging to the bottom of a carriage?!"

Mr. Roberts and Lambard shouted at each other. And then—

"Fireball."

The tattooed man unleashed his spell!

This is bad!

Jolt!

In that instant, the carriage shook violently. The orb of light fired by the tattooed man flew over the carriage, hit the trees on the opposite side, and exploded!

K-BA-BOOOM!

Our carriage was buffeted by the blast and overturned completely!

"...Ouch, ouch, ouch..."

While enduring pain all over my body, I managed to push myself up. Apparently, I had been unconscious for a while; Lambard’s carriage was nowhere to be seen.

—Most likely, the axle that had been damaged by the hacksaw snapped exactly when the tattooed man fired the Fireball. The carriage lost its balance because of that, which seemed to have saved us from a direct hit, but...

"...Ugh... gh..."

Hearing a groan, I looked over to see Mr. Roberts pushing himself up while shaking his head. From the look of it, he wasn't seriously injured, but...

"...Damn it... did I lose again in the end...?"

"For now, yeah."

I spoke to the teeth-gritting Mr. Roberts in a quiet voice. "But now that we know their tricks, we're definitely winning next time!"

Looking up at the sky for no reason, I firmly vowed our next victory in my heart.

Rumble, rumble...

"I have to ask... is it really going to be okay this time?"

"Of course!"

I spoke with total confidence to Mr. Roberts, who questioned me in an anxious voice while handling the reins. By the way, this time, I was wearing a simple white lace dress.

"Last time, I failed because I didn't know that tattooed guy was a sorcerer, but now that I know, there's nothing to fear! Before they can do anything, I'll blow them away without hesitation!"

Two days after being completely outdone by that tattooed sorcerer. This time, with a perfect, lethal setup, I had prepared the trap.

There were two reasons for the previous defeat. One: I was caught off guard because I didn't think the tattooed guy was a sorcerer. That's no longer an issue now that I know. And the other, biggest reason, was the shaking of the carriage. It's hard enough to chant as it is, and if more shaking is added, the spell is guaranteed to be interrupted.

Therefore! To dampen that vibration! This time, I prepared so many feather cushions in the cargo bed that you could bury yourself in them! With this, the vibration countermeasures are perfect! Buried in the fluffy cushions, I simply waited for the enemy to arrive.

And then—

"Fuhahahaha!"

The familiar loud laughter was heard from behind, just as the carriage entered the forest where no one else was around. Looking back, there was indeed that tank-like carriage! This time too, the driver was in full armor. The passenger (?) was the same

tattooed sorcerer.

Waiting for the two carriages to get reasonably close, the tattooed sorcerer raised his right hand, just like last time. I didn't know what it meant, but last time, a Windy Shield followed.

In that case—I hurriedly began chanting.

And soon after:

"Windy Shield!"

The tattooed sorcerer unleashed the spell! I knew it!

But my spell was complete as well!

"Windy Shield!"

Whoosh!

The two winds collided head-on and swirled into a vortex.

"What?! A sorcerer?! That’s cowardly, Roberts!"

"Look who’s talking!" Mr. Roberts screamed back instinctively at Lambard’s protest.

"Ours is a customer, so it’s fine!"

"What?! Ours is a customer too!"

"Hah! So you’re just a copycat after all! What a talentless imitation!"

"What did you call me?! If you just look at the face, your side looks way more like a monkey!"

"What was that?!"

While Mr. Roberts and Lambard were in the middle of their pointless bickering, the tattooed sorcerer was striking a pose with his right leg raised.

...I don't know what that pose is supposed to mean... it’s probably some lame reason like 'local custom' or 'he thinks it looks cool' though...

But regardless of the opponent, I’ll just do what I have to do!

I muttered a spell under my breath—it happened at the same time.

"Freeze Arrow!" as I activated my spell,

"Fireball!" as the tattooed sorcerer activated his.

One of the dozen or so cold arrows born in the void collided head-on with the light orb fired by the man!

G-Thump!

"—!"

The flames burst, and hot wind swirled. Piercing through the lingering smoke, Lambard's carriage gave chase.

—There was no damage to our side, but apparently, they were unharmed too.

At this rate, there's a possibility of an endless spell battle. In that case, should I unleash a big move and settle this once and for all?

...I don't really like the idea of using a big move on such small fries, but...

Actually, the spells the tattooed sorcerer used weren't all that great. So far, all he'd used were Windy Shield and Fireball. But the problem was that these two techniques easily blew away minor spells like Flame Arrow or Freeze Arrow.

Even though I knew the opponent's habits clearly—if he raised his right hand, it was Windy Shield, and if he raised his right leg...

Wait... could it be...

For a moment, a certain thought crossed my mind. If this guess was right—

If you think of it, experiment immediately! I hurriedly began chanting a certain spell.

It was a very simple spell. My spell was complete before the tattooed sorcerer could fire his next technique. Imaging holding a ball about the size of a person's head, I extended both hands forward—

"Be Bezel!"

And then, the spell activated.

Splosh!

"Whoa?!"

It was a moment later that Lambard on the rear carriage cried out.

"—What?! Water?!"

Yes. Just water. That spell was simply one that created a little bit of water. Originally,

it was meant for procuring drinking water while traveling, and usually, you'd chant it while holding a jar or something in both hands—

"—D-Damn it!"

It was after a brief pause that I heard the tattooed sorcerer's scream. Looking over, the tattoos all over his body seemed to be blurring and smearing.

"What's wrong?!"

"The spell... my Pattern Magic won't work!"

"Whaaaat!" Lambard shouted at the sorcerer's words.

...*What the heck is 'Pattern Magic'*...

The sorcerer raised his right hand when chanting Windy Shield and his right leg when chanting Fireball. I had imagined the reason like this:

—*Could it be—that the way to chant the spells is just written there?*

If so, that strange behavior would be explained. Thinking that far, I had realized something else. Would someone who can't even remember a spell as simple as Windy Shield really be able to endure something as painful as full-body tattoos?

And then, I imagined: what if those things that looked like tattoos were just written there with ink or something?

I tried splashing water on him to check—and it seems I hit the jackpot.

...Wait! In that case, what does that make me for losing to such a pathetic guy once...?

...W-Well, let's put that aside.

Anyway! With this, they no longer have anyone who can use attack magic! That means the victory is as good as ours!

All that's left is the finishing blow! I began chanting the Fireball spell.

However—

"—Tsk! In that case!"

With a click of his tongue, Lambard snapped his whip against the horses. With a neigh, the horses increased their speed even more.

What?!

Is this the difference between a one-horse and two-horse carriage? Lambard’s carriage caught up at an unexpected speed and pulled up right alongside us before my spell was complete.

D-Damn! Does he intend to launch that hacksaw-axle-cutting attack?!

I wanted to blow them away, but if I fired a Fireball here, I’d be caught in the blast too.

Left with no choice, I interrupted the Fireball and began chanting the Freeze Arrow spell. Now that the opponent couldn't use spells, he shouldn't be able to use the counter-technique of blowing it away with Windy Shield. Before our axle gets cut, I’ll take them down with an attack spell!

"...Hmph."

It was right after I started chanting that Lambard chuckled softly. With a smile still etched on his lips, he slammed a lever on the left side of the driver’s seat!

In that moment—

Clang!

A hook with a rope attached flew out from the side of the other carriage’s passenger area and pierced into our carriage's body!

What...?!

Next, Lambard slammed a lever on the right side.

With a small click, while still carrying Lambard, the driver’s seat portion separated from the passenger area and became a small, one-person carriage.

"W-Wait for me!"

The sorcerer, not wanting to be left behind, hurriedly jumped onto that part. The two horses and the small carriage dashed off, overtaking us and pulling away.

The detached passenger area remained stuck to us with the anchor hook.

...Wait... could this be... the classic villain move, a self-destruct device?!

"Mr. Roberts! Jump!"

At the same time as I shouted, I leaped off the left side of the carriage!

K-BA-BOOOOM!

The explosion flashed at that exact moment.

"Curse you! Not once, but twice! But! Next time, I’m definitely taking them down! —So, when are we going next, Mr. Roberts?"

...Sighhhhh...

To my enthusiastic words, Mr. Roberts responded with a gloomy sigh.

This was after the carriage had been blown up by Lambard’s self-destruct device, and Mr. Roberts and I had returned to town with the horses.

...Wait! Could it be he doesn't like that even with me there, we were outdone both times?! Is it a contract cancellation? No reward?!

This is bad! I have to follow up somehow!

"...Hmph. Don't worry, Mr. Roberts. Those first two times were just to see how the opponent works. Our real counterattack starts now."

"...For saying that, you were blown away pretty spectacularly yourself..."

Tsk...

"That was acting."

While hiding my internal agitation and pretending to be calm, I spoke.

"—Don't worry, Miss Lina. It’s true that I paid a crazy high price to hire you as a bodyguard, and yet both times I was blown away and my carriages were destroyed. I’m thinking, 'Isn't this pointless as a bodyguard? You thief, you thief, give me back my money,' but I have no intention of blaming you for that."

"....."

"The reason I was sighing is because we’re about to run out of horses."

"Run out of horses?"

Not understanding the meaning of Mr. Roberts’ words, I instinctively knitted my brows. It’s true that the horses pulling the carriages got injured during the previous troubles, but for example, I had healed the wounds of the horse injured this time with recovery magic... In fact, there were several horses lined up in the stable of this building.

"What exactly does that mean...?"

"...Once they’re attacked like that, the horses get scared," Mr. Roberts said in a gloomy tone. "They’re fine for normal running, but when Lambard’s carriage chases them, they remember the fear of being attacked and might go on a rampage. —In fact, a horse that was attacked before did exactly that. So we can't use such horses for this plan. And the usable horses that haven't been victimized... there are only one or two left, at most."

He let out another sigh.

I see. So that’s it.

"—Then there’s nothing to worry about at all."

"Nothing to worry about?" Mr. Roberts wore a suspicious expression at my confident words.

"That’s right. Because now that I know their tricks and I’ve gotten serious, from now on, only their side will be suffering damage!"

And so, for the third time—I jolt along the highway in a carriage.

There might be no need for a disguise anymore, but just in case, this time I’m in the simple hemp clothes of an ordinary town girl. After being attacked twice, I can more or less guess the kind of places where they’ll ambush us.

The place where the carriage is currently proceeding is exactly one of those spots.

There is no sign of anyone around. Only the monotonous sound of wheels and the chirping of birds among the trees.

—Suddenly—

Whoosh!

A flock of birds takes flight from the forest!

Here they come!

The moment I thought that—

"Ho-ho-ho-ho!"

The voice I least wanted to hear echoed among the trees!

(Wild Ride! The Stagecoach!: To be continued!)

Next Episode Preview!

Who is the owner of that unmistakable, piercing laughter appearing before Lina?! (Answer: Naga)

In the disadvantageous conditions atop a jolting carriage, what kind of battle will she show us?! Lina Inverse!

What kind of conclusion will be reached in the pointless struggle between Roberts and Lambard?!

Next time: **"Wild Ride! The Stagecoach!" (Final Part)**. If the author doesn't run away, see you then!

Wild Ride! The Stagecoach! (Part 2)

Synopsis

The job Lina Inverse took on this time was, at first glance, a mundane escort mission for a stagecoach. However, Lambard—the rival association head aiming to crush the business of Lina's client, Roberts—has launched a blatant interference campaign!

Aboard a carriage that shakes and jolts violently—a situation utterly disadvantageous for chanting spells—Lina managed to repel the first assassin after much struggle. But now, the next assassin approaches Lina and the others, letting out a boisterous laugh that sounds hauntingly familiar!

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!"

Rumble, rumble, rumble.

The sound of approaching wheels and that high-pitched laughter.

"—!?"

I hurriedly looked back to see a two-horse carriage racing toward us. On the driver's seat, as per usual, was Lambard, clad head-to-toe in armor. And in the passenger seat—

Just as I predicted, a single figure stood tall, fluttering a mantle and black hair, completely unfazed by the carriage's swaying!

The source of countless neighbor complaints! A walking nuisance! The "goldfish poop" herself! The one and only Naga the White Serpent!

"Ho-ho-ho-ho! If it isn't Lina! It seems we're enemies today! —But what on earth is the meaning of that?! That ridiculous outfit?"

"Shut up! It's a disguise! A disguise! What about you?! Why are you wearing that exact same outfit as always!?"

"You just don't get it, Lina Inverse! To stick to one's policies without being swayed by the situation! That is what a true adult does! Well, I suppose there's no point saying this to a child like you. Ho-ho-ho-ho!"

"There you go with that nonsensical logic again! Regardless! I'm not holding back! Naga!"

"That's just what I want!"

The two of us began chanting spells simultaneously. My spell was finished first!

"Flare Arrow!"

I unleashed a dozen or so arrows of flame toward the pursuing carriage!

However—

"Windy Shield!"

Whoosh!

"—Wha...!?"

The one who blew my spell away with a blast of pressurized wind wasn't Naga, but Lambard sitting on the driver's seat! This guy! He can use magic!?

In that case, I'll use a different method—

But before I could start my next chant, Naga's spell was complete!

"Vemul!"

Stone Golem creation!?

Thump!

The ground beside the road ahead swelled, twisted, and took shape, forming a giant humanoid figure!

Roooaaar!

Whether it was the creaking of stone or a literal howl, the golem's roar echoed through the trees!

...However...

Rumble, rumble, rumble!

The two carriages were currently sprinting. During the time lag between the spell's activation and the golem's completion, the two carriages simply sped right past the spot where the golem was.

"....."

"....."

As everyone watched in silence, the golem hurriedly began running after us. It was

actually a little bit cute...

But no matter how desperately it ran, perhaps due to the sorrow of its heavy weight, the distance between it and our carriage only grew wider. Soon enough, the figure of the desperately running golem vanished behind the trees.

"...Hey..."

As Lambard glared at her, Naga quickly averted her eyes.

"—Hmph. That's about the size of it."

"What 'size' is what, exactly!?"

Alright! Now's my chance!

I grabbed one of the cushions from the floor and hurled it at Naga's approaching carriage!

Whump!

"tch!?"

With unerring aim, the cushion hit Naga square in the face!

Of course, being hit by a single cushion doesn't hurt a bit. However—that's under normal circumstances. Atop a violently shaking carriage, it was more than enough to break the balance of Naga, who was standing tall.

"Noah-heeeeee!?"

She stumbled, lost her footing, and tumbled right off the carriage.

"Uaaah!? You're useless!" Lambard cried out in despair.

—You should've known if she'd be useful just by looking at her outfit...—

While thinking that in the corner of my mind, my prepared spell was completed!

"Vemul!"

The same spell Naga used. But the application was different! The golem's appearance point was a little further down the road, right in the path of Lambard's carriage!

"Uwa-wa-wa-wa-wa!?"

Lambard frantically handled the reins. But he was slightly too late; one wheel of the carriage ran over the golem as it was still swelling up from the ground, its shape not

even settled yet.

CRASH!

With a spectacular sound, Lambard's carriage overturned completely!

"Yes! All right!"

"We did it, Miss Lina!"

To the sound of my celebratory pose, Mr. Roberts called out excitedly and pulled the reins to stop the horses.

"? What are you doing?"

"It's obvious! I'm going to go make fun of Lambard!"

Answering clearly with a look of pure joy, Mr. Roberts climbed down from the carriage.

Well, he's been through a lot of grief, so I guess I get it.

"If that's the case, I'm coming too."

I followed him down. Actually, since the possibility of the opponent counterattacking remained, this kind of action wasn't very wise, but seeing Mr. Roberts' face, it seemed useless to stop him. In that case, I had no choice but to follow and back him up just in case.

Beside Lambard, who was twitching on the ground still wearing his full armor, Mr. Roberts stood tall and—

"—C... curse you, you coward...!"

However, before Mr. Roberts could open his mouth, those words were spat out by the fallen Lambard.

"What did you say!?"

Losing the initiative and being called a coward so suddenly, Mr. Roberts' voice rose in anger. "Where am I a coward!? Where!?"

"...Putting a sorcerer on your carriage and attacking us when we've done nothing wrong... it's preposterous, the height of cowardice..."

"Stop talking in your sleep! You guys are the ones who started it in the first place!"

At Lambard's completely oblivious words, Mr. Roberts’ voice grew harsh.

"Hmph... on our side, the customer did it of their own accord. To misunderstand that and call us villains... wow, you've got quite the nerve. Just because you can't beat us in the actual stagecoach business, your spite is truly pathetic..."

"Who's losing to the likes of you in business?! Our stagecoach service is the best in the world!"

"In that case... how about we settle this stagecoach grudge with a race...?"

"Fine! Interesting! I'll take that challenge!"

With that, Mr. Roberts pointed sharply at the still-fallen Lambard.

Ah. He fell for it.

As it turns out, in terms of being an actor, Lambard was a level or two above Mr. Roberts. What Lambard just did—ignoring the opponent's words, brushing them off, and intentionally saying things to rub them the wrong way. Once the opponent falls into his pace, he strikes with a challenge that's advantageous to him. It's a very typical provocation method.

Then why did Lambard need to provoke him? Most likely, Lambard was also being cornered by financial issues or something similar. Therefore, he aimed for a quick, all-or-nothing settlement.

The reason I didn't point out that it was a provocation was simple: it would settle things faster. Otherwise, I might end up stuck riding the carriage forever until Lambard's side went bankrupt.

And so—the talk moved from a pointless war of attrition to a one-shot, high-speed race.

On that day, a massive crowd had gathered in the central plaza of Delazac City.

And why wouldn't they? Today was the day the two stagecoach associations in this town would settle their score with a race. There was no way anyone would miss such an event.

Stalls lined the streets, and flags, banners, and streamers colored the area excessively. In the center of the plaza was Mr. Roberts' two-horse carriage.

"So...? I'd like to ask, Roberts. What's the deal with that girl you have sitting next to you? I'd think one driver is enough."

"Look who's talking. Who's that sitting next to your driver's seat?"

Yes. To the right of Mr. Roberts sat me, and to the right of Lambard sat Naga. By the way, since disguises were now meaningless, I was in my usual sorcerer style.

Mr. Roberts and Lambard glared at each other for a while, and eventually said in unison:

"She's the Navigation Instructor."

...Hmm. Their thought patterns might be identical. Could it be that the biggest reason for their rivalry is "narcissistic rage" or something similar?

While that was happening...

"Ah—it's about time."

Walking into the center of the plaza with a large flag and a shaky gait was a white-haired old man in his sixties—none other than the Mayor of the town.

"Now then, first, would the customers please board their respective carriages."

Following the Mayor's words, the people standing near the carriages boarded the two vehicles. Ten people per carriage.

"Ah..."

The Mayor took out a memo from his pocket.

"I shall explain the rules once more... This race is for the purpose of merging the two stagecoach associations in Delazac City... the Roberts Association and the Lambard Association. The winner will become the chairperson of the unified Delazac Stagecoach Association, and the losing association will be absorbed and merged..."

Mr. Roberts and Lambard glared at each other again, sparks flying from their eyes. Ignoring them, the Mayor continued.

"...The method is: depart from this town carrying ten innocent civilian volunteers... the first one to reach the central plaza of the town of Zanir with the passengers alive and without anyone missing wins... I have sent my sons to Zanir in advance, so they will be the judges. Furthermore, no protests against the judgment will be accepted... That is all. Are both parties ready?"

Mr. Roberts and Lambard nodded silently.

However—

"Wait just a minute!"

A protest arose from among the passengers. The speaker was a skinny middle-aged guy on our carriage.

"Listening to this, 'innocent civilians' and 'alive'... that wording makes it sound like we're about to go through something absolutely horrible!?"

...Tch. Sharp guy.

No matter how much they dress it up as a "carriage match," would Lambard or Naga ever do something as noble as a "fair and square fight"? The answer is, of course, no. If they really intended to play fair, Lambard wouldn't be wearing full armor as usual, and there'd be no need to have Naga on board under the flimsy pretext of a "Navigation Instructor."

...Well, we're the same in that regard, but still!

Ours is strictly for self-defense! If the opponent attacks, we have no choice but to fight back with everything we've got under the banner of legitimate self-defense.

So, that's how it is. If Naga and I go at it, the fate of the people riding with us is easy to imagine.

...Well, I'm sure the passengers joined this event with a light heart, but in life, things you do with a light heart can sometimes determine your destiny. They'll just have to accept it as a life lesson.

—That said, if I spoke the truth right now, all the volunteers would run away at full speed.

"It's fine," I said in a confident tone before anyone else could speak, pointing sharply at Lambard's carriage. "Because the customers over there are going to go through much worse."

"Hey! Saying 'they'll go through worse' implies that we're going through something bad too!"

Ugh. He caught on.

Fine. If that's how it's going to be.

"This is no joke! I only came because I heard I could go to Zanir for free... if it's dangerous, I'm out!"

"I-If that's the case, let me off!"

"Me too!"

The passengers began to lift themselves from their seats—

That was when my spell was completed. I slammed my hand onto the floor of the carriage.

"Dug Haut!"

Crack-crackle!

The spirals of ice crawling across the floor made contact with the passengers' feet, freezing everyone's shoes to the floor.

—Normally, this spell has the power to turn the target into an ice statue, but since that would be going too far, I arranged the spell a bit to suppress its power.

"Wait a minute!"

"What do you think you're doing!?"

"Oh, nothing. I just thought it’d be dangerous to jump off a carriage suddenly. It's for safety. For safety."

"Where is the safety in this!?"

"It's safer than that other carriage!" I said, pointing to the Lambard-Naga team's carriage.

There, the passengers had already been frozen solid by Naga's spell.

"See? You don't want to end up like that, do you?"

At my words, the passengers looked at me with eyes of terror.

"I-Is there any guarantee we won't end up like that!?"

"No one knows the future."

"Hieeeeeeee!"

"Let us off!"

"Everything will be fine, everyone," Mr. Roberts said, looking over his shoulder with a calm voice. "Because we're all in this together, even if we die."

"LET US OFF AFTER ALL!"

"I DON'T WANT TO DIE!"

Hmph. What a bunch of poor losers.

"...Well now... it seems both parties are ready..."

Ignoring the protests and screams of the passengers, the Mayor spoke flatly.

"I shall now give the start signal. ...Ahem... Now then! Delazac Stagecoach Association Integration Cup, are you ready for departure?"

Mr. Roberts and Lambard nodded silently.

"In that case... Ready—START!"

Snap!

The flag in the Mayor's hand fluttered.

"Hah!"

Crack!

Along with the shouts of the two drivers, the sharp sound of whips rang out.

Rumble, rumble, rumble!

Hooves kicked the earth, and wheels creaked.

Now, the battle for the future of the Delazac City Stagecoach Association has begun!

With the loud sound of hooves and wheels, the two carriages race!

Overtaking and being overtaken, being overtaken and overtaking. Mr. Roberts and Lambard handled the reins and used the whips, kicking up clouds of dust as they sped down the highway!

"—Miss Lina! It's about time!"

Mr. Roberts spoke just as the town of Delazac vanished from view.

—Time to make a move—

I nodded slightly and began chanting under my breath—

But before it could be completed.

"Freeze Arrow!"

Zip!

An arrow of cold fired by Naga from the carriage running to our right grazed right past me!

"Duaaaaaah!"

The scream came from the back seat. Looking over, two unlucky passengers had been hit by the previous attack and were frozen solid.

"This is no joke! Let us off!"

To the passengers screaming with pale faces, I interrupted my spell to calm them down so they wouldn't panic.

"Of course I'm worried! Look at this guy!" he said, pointing to one of the frozen passengers.

"It's fine! He's just frozen!"

"That's not 'fine' at all! It's already bad enough!"

"I'll thaw him out later and he'll be good as new!"

"Is that the issue!?"

"If you worry about the small things, you won't be popular with the ladies!"

"I already have a wife, so I don't care about that!"

Good grief. They have an answer for everything. In that case!

"Sleeping!"

Flop, flop. Zzz... zzz...

And so, the passengers became quiet.

I looked over at Naga.

"Naga! What was that for, so suddenly?! I thought this was a fair and square match!?"

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! You make me laugh, Lina Inverse! That was obviously a legitimate act of self-defense!"

"How!?"

"If I had stayed quiet, you eventually would have attacked me! In that case, a counterattack is self-defense! I just did the counterattack first!"

"Who does a counterattack like that!?"

This... this woman!

But anyway, this gave us a perfect excuse to attack them. ...Though one could argue I was going to attack without an excuse anyway, but that's neither here nor there.

However, the problem was the method of attack. The easiest way to win, needless to say, would be to target the horses or the passengers, but I couldn't do something so villainous.

...Well, I thought a little bit of freezing might be okay, but the problem here was Lambard. I didn't know if he could use magic naturally or if he just memorized a spell someone taught him, but it was proven last time that he could at least use Windy Shield. If I fired a half-baked ice spell, it would just be blown away.

In that case—how about this!?

While chanting, I secretly took out my wallet from my pocket, left only one copper coin inside, and put the rest of the coins in my pocket. Then, the spell was completed—

"Freeze Arrow!"

"Naive! Windy Shield!"

Just as I thought, the ice arrows I fired were blown away by Lambard's spell.

Now!

I threw the wallet in my hand toward Lambard. A thin string was tied to the wallet to prevent pickpocketing. The wallet with the copper coin acted as a weight, and the string tangled around Lambard's full-body armor. The other end of the string was in my hand.

Simultaneously, I began chanting.

"—What!?"

Not understanding my intention, Lambard struggled frantically. But the tangled string wasn't going to come off that easily, nor would it break. After all, this string was made of metal.

And then my spell was completed!

"Dill Brand!"

Zap!

"Gyaaaah!?"

The lightning strike traveled through the metal string and the full-body armor, coursing through Lambard's entire body.

As expected, he couldn't withstand it; he let go of the reins and tumbled from the driver's seat.

Yes!

I let go of the string, and that's the end of that! It's a waste of a wallet and a copper coin, but of course, I'll claim that as a necessary expense later.

"That settles it! Naga! Without a driver, a carriage can't run!"

Indeed, having lost its driver, the other carriage began to slow down little by little, falling behind.

However, to my triumphant words, for some reason, Naga wore a fearless smile—

"—Wha—!?"

She slowly moved to the driver's seat and took the reins!

"It's no use! It's not something an amateur can handle!"

"Hah!"

Ignoring Mr. Roberts' voice, Naga handled the reins. The two horses accelerated.

"What!?"

Mr. Roberts cried out in shock. The carriage Naga was driving sped through the highway with the same momentum as before!

"Who is she?! That woman?! That handling of the reins... if anything—no, it's definitely better than Lambard's!"

Wha... what!?

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! How naive, Lina! You thought you'd win just by taking down the driver... Maneuvering a carriage is just a minor hobby for me, Naga the White Serpent!"

This woman! She uses strange techniques sometimes, but I never expected her to have a hidden skill like this!

"W... what should we do, Miss Lina!?"

"Calm down! Mr. Roberts! It's just that the opponent we have to defeat has become Naga alone!"

Scolding the flustered Mr. Roberts, I started my spell—

"Freeze Arrow!"

Before I could even start chanting, an attack spell flew from Naga while she was still maneuvering the carriage!

"Tch!?"

I hurriedly shifted my upper body and dodged one of the incoming strikes.

Curse you! In that case, an eye for an eye, a Freeze Arrow for a Freeze Arrow—

Thump.

I heard a heavy sound.

"?"

When I turned my eyes toward it—

"Uaaaaaaaaah!"

There was the empty driver's seat!

Could it be that Mr. Roberts was hit by Naga's previous Freeze Arrow and fell off!?

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! It seems the ones losing their driver and losing the race are you, Lina!"

"N... Not yet!"

I moved to the driver's seat and took the masterless reins.

"Hah!"

One shout, one flick of the reins!

Rumble, rumble...

The horses' pace slowed down.

.....Huh?

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! Your driver said it, didn't he? It's not something an amateur can handle!"

Curse her! If Naga can do it, there’s no way I can't!

"Hah! Hiyah! Yah!"

No matter how much I swung the reins, the pace of the slowed horses wouldn't return.

We had the lead for a while, but soon Naga's carriage caught up—and easily overtook us.

Damn it! In that case, the last resort!

I muttered a spell under my breath—

"Fire Lance!"

Whoosh!

The lance of fire I unleashed pierced between the two horses pulling the carriage.

Twitch!

The horses' bodies certainly seemed to tremble for a moment. Toward their backs, I spoke in a quiet tone:

"Run. Please."

Clop-clop-clop-clop!

Simultaneously, the horses began a full-speed dash!

"Hah! How's that, Naga! This is the 'Sincere Dialogue' directly taught by a certain pacifist!"

"...A certain pacifist...?"

"The real battle starts now! Naga!"

"Hmph! Just what I want! Lina!"

The two began chanting spells simultaneously. And then, the high-speed race of overtaking and being overtaken, and the exchange of spells, began.

The sun sets on the edge of the western mountains. Just as the day was about to end...

Rumble, rumble, rumble!

"Freeze Arrow!"

Crack-crackle!

While continuing the exchange of attack spells, the carriages of Naga and me arrived very close to the town of Zanir. ...If I hadn't scouted the course with Mr. Roberts beforehand, we might have ended up racing pointlessly without knowing the way to our destination.

"Whoaaa!"

A distant cheer erupted. Looking ahead, I could see a massive crowd even from a distance at the edge of the town of Zanir. —It seemed the other town was also in a festival mood, as I could see colorful flags and such.

"—Hah!"

Crack!

Naga used the whip on the horses and went into a final spurt!

Not a chance! We're going too!

"Go for it! Otherwise, you guys are going to be miserable!"

Whether my sincerity or a maiden's prayer got through, our horses also picked up their pace!

We overtook Naga's carriage, which had been leading by a nose, by half a horse's length, only for the other carriage to overtake us again. Amidst the cheers, the two carriages burst into the town of Zanir!

After that, it was a straight line to the central plaza! In this situation, there was no longer time to chant attack spells.

"Hah! Hah!"

"Come on! Why are you running so slowly!? Do you want to treat everyone to horse sashimi!?"

The four horses ran through the street with all their might. Ahead was the fountain in the central plaza. Before it was a single piece of tape.

That’s—the goal!

Hooves kicked the earth, wheels creaked—and then, the tape was—cut.

"GOOOOOOOOAL!"

A man's voice echoed through the plaza. In the evening sun, a flag fluttered. From my

perspective, we must have arrived at almost the exact same time.

The judgment—!?

"The winner—"

The man's flag was raised.

Pointing toward Naga on the driver's seat.

"Wooooooooooh!"

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!"

"...Ugh...!"

While Naga's laughter echoed, overpowering the roar of the crowd, I hung my head in despair on the driver's seat.

—And so—

The stagecoach associations of Delazac City were merged into one.

Mr. Roberts, while feeling down, told me, "You did a good job," and paid me a reward, though it was quite a bit less than the promised amount.

On the other hand, Lambard seems to be unable to snap out of his daze yet. ...Well... I guess he would be. After all, Naga was suddenly sitting in the chairperson's seat that he had been aiming for.

Naga was determined to be the chairperson.

When that announcement, which was less than a sleep-talk, was made, of course Roberts, Lambard, and I all complained. But the Mayor who ran the competition was, despite his frail appearance, incredibly stubborn.

"—No! When I explained the rules, I certainly said 'the winner will be the chairperson'! I didn't say either Roberts or Lambard! Since neither of you was on the carriage when it reached the goal, Miss Naga, who was maneuvering the winning carriage, is the winner! Besides! You all agreed that no protests against the judgment would be accepted! Anyone with a complaint can get out of town!"

—So, he went on in that manner.

And so, for ten days until the association went bankrupt and dissolved, and she was cornered by the employees, Naga served as the chairperson of the Delazac City

Stagecoach Association.

("Wild Ride! The Stagecoach!": End)

Milk Elegy

"Wait just a minute."

On a certain afternoon, at a cafe terrace. I interrupted my companion and lifted myself slightly off my chair.

"What is it?"

I stared intently at the face of the man across the table, who had asked that question with total composure.

"So, what you're saying is... basically... are you telling me to catch a **milk thief**?"

"To put it simply, yes."

"....."

He said it so bluntly that I stood there for a while, completely lost for words.

About a month ago, I had visited this city, Delazac, once before. I got caught up in a feud between two rival stagecoach associations, and after all was said and done... in the end, thanks to a certain female sorcerer I know, the association went bankrupt. She was, quite literally, pummeled by the staff... but anyway.

This time, due to certain circumstances, I stopped by this town—a place she likely finds unpleasant—specifically to shake that woman off. And there, I ran into the man who had been the head of one of the associations during the previous incident: the man currently before my eyes, **Mr. Roberts Dinbolt**.

"True—"

Across the table, Mr. Roberts let out a small sigh. "If you had done your job properly during the last request, the association wouldn't have collapsed, I wouldn't be wandering the streets, and I wouldn't have had to make a request like this. To put it simply, I secretly think to myself that you're partly responsible, so it wouldn't kill you to do me this favor—but for now, I've decided not to say that out loud—"

"....."

...Come to think of it, this is exactly the kind of guy he was... Mr. Roberts...

"The association has only just started, and our funds aren't exactly plentiful. To be

honest, I can't offer a very large reward. However, despite that, I'm asking you! Please!"

Mr. Roberts bowed his head. Hmm... when someone comes at me that straight...

"...B-but, a milk thief? You don't have to go out of your way to ask me. Why not just report it to the authorities?"

"Of course I reported it. But as expected, their response was, 'It's just a milk thief.' They give me lip service like 'We'll stay alert' and that's it. If I leave it to them, I don't know when they'll solve it... or if they'll even start investigating. It's no joke. My livelihood is on the line here. That's why I'm asking you. Please! I'm begging you!"

"...Hmm..."

I thought for a moment after he said that.

"Anyway... first, let me hear the details."

"Right. Then, come with me to the association."

"Got it."

I nodded and quietly slid the bill on the table toward Mr. Roberts.

A short while after the stagecoach association went bankrupt—a young man named **Kite**, a former employee, visited the despairing Mr. Roberts. Apparently, Kite's family ran a ranch in a town a bit further away. He came up with a plan to source milk from there and sell it in this town.

Of course, there were other shops selling milk in this town. However, his idea was to deliver milk at a low price every morning to houses and shops that signed a contract. For this, he reached out to Mr. Roberts, who had plenty of know-how in things like route adjustment from his days in the stagecoach association. Mr. Roberts gladly accepted, and thus, the **Delazac City Milk Delivery Association** was successfully established.

Even calling it an "association," it had only just begun. Funds weren't abundant. There were only three employees. While planning the delivery routes, Mr. Roberts himself drove a wagon every morning to deliver milk.

—However—

One morning, after a certain number of regular customers had been established and operations were getting on track: in the middle of the morning mist, while driving his

wagon as usual, Mr. Roberts was suddenly struck by an intense drowsiness. His resistance was futile, and he fell into a deep sleep. By the time he woke up, the sun was high in the sky, and one can of milk from the back of the wagon was gone—

"One can?" I interrupted Mr. Roberts and asked instinctively.

"Yes. Since the ordered amounts vary, we put the milk in large, medium, or small cans from the start and deliver the container itself. We collect the empty containers the next morning. The one stolen was a medium-sized can. I'll show you the actual thing later, but it's about the size of a small bag."

In the reception room of the Milk Delivery Association headquarters—a small building at the edge of town. The one who answered in place of Mr. Roberts was the founder, Kite. He was a handsome young man around twenty years old, with black hair, a slender build, and a soft-spoken manner.

"Hmm... then the theory that someone stole it just for a quick drink is out..."

Mr. Roberts nodded at my words. "Yeah. It's too much for one person to drink. I suppose you could force it down, but no one steals just to force themselves to drink. Anyway, it’s been like that since that day. The same thing started happening every single day."

"Every day?"

"Yeah. The next day, I fell asleep the same way, and when I woke up and checked the back..."

"Another can was gone...?"

He shook his head. "No. All the cans were there. I felt relieved and continued the deliveries... but after a while, I noticed. One of the cans was strangely light."

"Don't tell me..."

Mr. Roberts nodded firmly. "Yeah. One of the milk cans was empty. The contents weren't just poured out; the inside was as clean as if it had been washed. It had been swapped with the empty can stolen the day before."

"I see..."

Probably a premeditated crime using a 'Sleep' spell...

"It's been happening every day lately... and what's more, there are three delivery people—basically all the members of the association—but it's always my wagon that

gets targeted."

"That’s why I’m starting to think this might be a personal grudge against Mr. Roberts..." Kite added this time. "True, the amount stolen each time isn't much. But we can't just leave it alone, and since we're operating on low margins and high volume, we can't ignore it when it happens every day. To be honest, I can't offer a huge reward... but would five gold coins as a success fee be acceptable?"

"Hmm..."

Five gold coins for catching a thief... based on market rates, it's definitely not a great reward... but the target is just a thief. It shouldn't be that hard to beat them up and catch them. And I do feel a bit guilty about the previous incident...

"Alright. I'll take the job."

"Oh! Really!?"

"Thank you so much!"

"Well then, let's get started—"

The door to the room opened with a click, cutting off Kite's words. A silver-haired woman around seventeen or eighteen years old entered, holding a tray with tea cups. She bowed her head slightly, acting somewhat timidly.

"....."

She stared at me for a while with a gaze that seemed to want to say something, but when our eyes met, she hurriedly looked away and began arranging the teacups on the table.

"Miss Lina. Let me officially introduce her. She’s our other association member, **Melone**."

"...P-pleased to meet you."

She gave a quick bow and hurriedly scurried out of the room. Hmm. Seems like the shy, introverted type.

"...Actually, to tell you the truth, I've proposed to her..." Kite said somewhat bashfully after she left. "The answer... hasn't come yet, though."

"Don't worry, Chairman. Melone likes you too. You can tell by looking at her."

"P-please don't tease me, Mr. Roberts... I'm sure it's because this incident happened that she hasn't been able to think clearly... Ah, anyway... well, there are those

personal circumstances, too. That’s why I want to solve this case as soon as possible. I’m counting on you, Miss Lina."

"Got it. Then let's start! We begin tomorrow morning!"

Thin morning mist hung over the town. Just as the color of the sky began to change from black to white. Mr. Roberts and I began our full-scale operation to arrest the milk thief!

The method was very simple. I would tail Mr. Roberts' delivery wagon from a short distance, and if the culprit tried anything, I'd catch them in the act. Even at this hour, people were already starting to work. Through the morning mist, I could see figures standing here and there along the edges of the streets.

The problem was this mist. It helped hide me from the culprit, but on the flip side, it would make it easy to lose sight of them if they ran. Would this mist turn out to be a blessing or a curse...?

Mr. Roberts' wagon proceeded through the streets, making pickups and deliveries at various houses. Soon, we left the main road and entered a residential area where there was no foot traffic yet.

...If the culprit is going to strike, it'll be around here...

I thought as I tailed the wagon. Then—*Clunk*.

The wagon suddenly stopped with a small jolt. It wasn't one of the delivery spots. Through the mist, I could see Mr. Roberts on the driver's seat, his head slumped slightly, showing no sign of movement.

—He was put to sleep!?

In that case, the culprit must be nearby! Since they can use 'Sleep,' there's a high chance they can use other spells. I’ll wait for them to show up and take them down with a single hit! I chanted a spell under my breath and waited quietly for the culprit to appear.

—However—

After waiting for a while, there was no sign of anyone coming out. Could it be—did they notice me? Or are they just being cautious and watching...? As I was thinking that... *Step... step...*

A single figure emerged from the hazy mist, killing their footsteps. The figure walked

straight toward Mr. Roberts' wagon.

—There!

The figure I saw through the mist was a man in his thirties with black hair and a sturdy build. I'll let him get a bit closer—

Just as I thought that. *Clack*. A small sound came from nearby.

Instantly, the man flinched! He spun on his heel and dashed away! Oh no!

"Freeze Arrow!"

Whiz-crack! The spell I hurriedly fired was blocked halfway by the wagon, and the remaining half all missed. Damn it! No choice then!

"Wait! You milk thief!"

"!?"

I dashed out in pursuit, and the opponent increased his speed even further. I won't let you escape! I chanted another spell under my breath—

Just as I was about to fire it. The man suddenly changed course and dove into a side alley. When I caught up and peered into the alley, the man’s back was just disappearing around a winding corner.

Agh! How annoying! I can't even fire an attack spell like this. The idea of chasing from above with a 'Levitation' spell crossed my mind, but the protruding eaves of the lined-up houses would block my view, making it impossible to track him. Simply put, I had no choice but to chase him on foot!

Anyway, I ran into the alley after the man. Every now and then, I’d catch a glimpse of his back as if to remind me he was there, but he’d quickly vanish again, and the gap between us didn't seem to be closing.

Ngh! Does he have the home-turf advantage!? But I can't give up. I ran and ran through the alleys—and then I realized. For a little while now, the man’s back had completely disappeared from view.

—Did I lose him?—

I thought so, but maybe he just widened the gap. Regardless, I’ll go a bit further—and as I ran... abruptly, my field of vision opened up. I had come out onto the main street of a residential area. There was no one walking around, only a single wagon in sight. For a second, I thought I had circled around the alleys and come back to the original

street, but apparently not. The person busy doing something on the wagon was—

"Kite!"

"Oh. Miss Lina. What's wrong? ...Wait, weren't you supposed to be chasing the milk thief with Mr. Roberts?" Kite asked in a relaxed tone while holding a milk can.

"He showed up! The thief!"

"What!?"

I pointed sharply at the alley I had just come out of. "I was chasing the culprit and just came out of that alley! Did anyone suspicious run this way!?"

"No, I didn't notice anyone... are you sure the culprit came out from there?"

"...Well... I went into the alley chasing him and kept going... but I lost sight of him halfway... anyway, I just kept going straight through the alley and came here..."

"Hmm..." Kite thought for a while. "—Anyway, hurry back to Mr. Roberts! The culprit might have circled back to the scene after letting you pass!"

"! Y-you're right!"

I spun around—

—However. By the time I returned to the scene where Mr. Roberts was sleeping soundly, one milk can had already been swapped with an empty one.

"This is the delivery route."

Kite spread a map of the town on the table, showing three red lines drawn on it. After returning to the headquarters, I and the association members met in a room to plan our next move. Kite pointed to the three parallel red lines in order.

"This line is Melone’s area, the middle one is Mr. Roberts' route, and the other one is my route. The attack this morning happened around here—" He pointed to a spot on the map on Mr. Roberts' route.

"The alley the culprit fled into was around here." This time, I pointed to the map.

Kite nodded slightly, tracing the map with his fingertip. "Since Miss Lina and I met around here... I think Miss Lina took a route like this. ...As you can see from this map, these alleys actually have quite a few side paths."

"...I realized that on the way back..." I muttered bitterly.

I hadn't noticed while I was chasing him, but that alley had many even narrower back alleys branching off from it. They were mostly blocked by stray cat deterrents, unlocked doors, or half-filled with bulky trash or luggage, but if someone knew the alleys were there and wanted to pass through, they could. Most likely, the culprit hid in one of those, let me pass, and then returned to Mr. Roberts' wagon to commit the crime.

"Which means the culprit is someone very familiar with this town," I said, nodding at Kite's words. "...Well, he got away this time, but I saw the culprit's face. Next time, I'll definitely catch him!"

"You saw it!? The culprit's face!?"

I nodded firmly at Mr. Roberts' words. "Probably over thirty. About the same height as you, Mr. Roberts, a fairly sturdy man. He had black hair grown to his shoulders and even had a mustache."

".....!"

The moment I said that, Mr. Roberts, Kite, and Melone all looked at each other and fell silent for a moment.

"A mustache...?"

"Could it be..."

Melone and Kite hesitated.

"Hey... I hope I'm wrong... but that wasn't **Lambard**, was it?"

"...Huh...?"

I made a dumbfounded sound at Mr. Roberts' question. Lambard was the name of the man who had been the boss of the rival association during the previous stagecoach feud.

"...Even if you ask me that... come to think of it, I only saw Lambard in his full armor, so I don't know his real face..."

"Did he have a faint scar on his right cheek!?"

"No... if you say 'faint'... there was mist, and there was distance, so I didn't see that far... but now that you mention it, the impression of his eyes was similar..."

"I see! That's it!" Kite slapped his knee excitedly. "Actually, since this association started, everyone has frequently seen Lambard lurking around this building!"

"It was his doing!" Mr. Roberts spat out.

I see. So he had a grudge, thinking the stagecoach association's failure was "originally Mr. Roberts' fault," and decided to harass Mr. Roberts as he made a fresh start as a milk delivery man.

"That would make sense. During the previous feud between the stagecoach associations, everyone learned some simple spells..."

At Kite's murmur, Mr. Roberts nodded. "It wouldn't be strange if Lambard could use 'Sleep.' He was actually using a few spells back then."

"...B-but, if he wanted to harass us, he wouldn't have to go through the trouble of stealing one can every day. He could just spill all the milk on the wagon..." Melone voiced her doubts in an uncertain tone.

I wagged my finger. "Naive. If it stays like this, the authorities will just think, 'It's only a little milk being stolen' and won't move. But if he did it on a large scale, they'd eventually get serious. If he wants to keep up the harassment purely, this way is actually more effective."

"...Is that how it is...?"

"That's how it is. Anyway, first! I need to confirm if the person I saw was really Lambard himself. Do you know where Lambard's house is?"

The three looked at each other again—and Kite was the one who spoke. "Of course. If—he hasn't moved, that is."

"Come to think of it, it's near where you lost him," Mr. Roberts added.

Kite nodded deeply. "—Alright. Got it. Melone, you know where Lambard's house is. Sorry, but could you guide Miss Lina there?"

"Yes. I understand. ...Well then..."

"Right. Let's head out immediately."

In cases like this, it's best to strike while the iron is hot. I gave a firm nod and stood up.

"...Um... Miss Lina..."

On the way to Lambard's house, Melone spoke in her usual timid tone. "...So... Miss Lina... your chest is quite small, isn't it..."

WHAM!

That sudden attack sent me tumbling over.

"Ah! Are you okay!?"

"SHUT UP! I wondered what you were going to say in that timid tone! What an incredibly rude thing to say all of a sudden!"

"That's... how is it rude... I just wondered if you were living a miserable life because of your small chest, Miss Lina, so I asked..."

"Are you trying to pick a fight with me?"

"Not at all! I just... I was just going to ask if you've ever been dumped by a man because you have no chest..."

I'm going to kill you. Seriously. If she wasn't guiding me, I would have blasted her with two or three attack spells without hesitation. Really.

"Come on, it's just a bit of small talk on the way."

"...Then please, pick some other topic. For example... right. Speaking of which, I heard Kite proposed to you. What's the deal with that?"

At my counter-teasing, her cheeks turned bright red. "T-that's... the Chairman is kind and a wonderful person..."

"Woo-woo! Then just hurry up and say 'yes'!"

"...But..." Melone's eyes suddenly looked lonely. "Someone like me... is not a good match for him at all..."

"Whaaaat are you talking about!?" I slapped her on the back. "He likes you. You like him. Then there's no problem at all!"

"...Is that how it works...?"

"That's how it works. Have more confidence. Besides..."

I cut my words short and stopped in my tracks. Across the street—that figure walking along was—

"What is it, Miss Lina?" Melone looked where I was staring.

"—Mr. Lambard!"

Yes. The person in our sights was undoubtedly—the man I saw at the scene of the

crime this morning.

"—Ngh!"

The moment we shouted, he must have noticed us too, because he spun around and suddenly started running!

"After him!"

"Yes!"

I and Melone started running. "So that really is Lambard!?"

"Yes! That’s him!"

"Alright! Let's catch him and solve this case once and for all!"

I chanted a spell under my breath—but before I could fire it!

"Windy Shield!"

Whoosh!

"!?"

The strong wind fired by Lambard hit me! I stumbled, lost my balance, bumped into Melone, and we both fell!

"...Ow, ow, ow..."

"Ouch... sorry, Melone, are you o... kay...?"

After saying that—I suddenly noticed something. But for now, chasing Lambard was the priority!

"I... I'm fine."

"Alright! Then let's go!"

"Yes!"

We started running again. Chasing him through the streets, we soon reached the main road. At this time of day, there were stalls and quite a few people. To make matters worse, I couldn't just fire spells recklessly. Is he planning to escape into the crowd!?

Not if I have anything to say about it! I chanted a spell under my breath—

"Raywing!"

Wrapping myself in a barrier of wind, I blasted off like I was skimming the ground with the high-speed flight spell! This spell's speed is proportional to the caster’s power, combined with altitude and carrying weight. When a sorcerer of my level flies low like this, it can reach a serious speed.

In no time, the gap between me and Lambard closed—

SMACK!

With a sudden, spectacular sound, my field of vision spun around and around! What the heck!? Despite being a bit dazed from the impact, I managed to regain my posture, canceled the spell, and landed on the ground.

"Are you okay!? Miss Lina!?" Melone cried as she caught up.

I blinked repeatedly. "...W... what? What just happened!?"

"You were hit by a carriage coming from the side! It’s because you were moving without looking left or right! From where I was watching, you went flying quite spectacularly—it was almost entertaining!"

Shut up! ...Well... true, I wasn't paying attention to my surroundings just now...

"—Right! More importantly, where is he!?"

I looked up. Across the corner of the next street, Lambard had stopped and was looking back at us. His condescending gaze clearly said, "Hmph. What is this stupid woman doing?"

...C... curse you, Lambard! I’m definitely going to knock you flat! I made a firm vow and glared at him—but before I could carry out that vow.

KABAM!

Lambard, on the street across from us, was also sent flying by a carriage coming from the side.

"...Ngh... ugh...?"

Lambard, whom we had tied up, finally regained consciousness a while after we carried him back to the association headquarters. Around him were me, Mr. Roberts, Kite, and Melone.

"—!?"

He tried to stand up in a hurry, only to realize he was tied up.

"W... what is the meaning of this!? You people!"

"What's the meaning of this? Don't make me laugh! That’s our line!" Mr. Roberts stepped closer.

"Well, for now, before we hand you over to the authorities, I thought I'd listen to your nonsense and have a laugh. ...Seriously, though... last time it was harassment using shill customers. This time it's harassment by stealing milk. Your scale is really small, isn't it?"

At my perfectly mocking words, Lambard glared at me. "Shut up, brat! Let me make this clear: I’m innocent in this incident!"

"Liar!"

THWACK! The kick I delivered along with my words hit Lambard square in the head.

"It... It's true! Believe me!"

"On what basis am I supposed to believe you!? Everyone saw you lurking around this building! And this morning, I saw your face clearly! Plus, just now! As soon as you saw us, you dashed away! In this situation, how is a delusional excuse like 'I'm not the culprit' supposed to work!?"

"Hmph...! About this morning...! You suddenly called me a thief and started chasing me, so I ran! I couldn't stand being framed as the culprit! The reason I ran earlier was the same!"

"Oho. Then what about lurking around this building? And this morning, approaching Mr. Roberts' wagon when he fell asleep? Surely that wasn't 'just a coincidence'?"

"...Th... that was... well..." Lambard averted his eyes, muttering, "...I heard these guys started a new business and were struggling in various ways... so I thought I might as well help them out by getting a job here..."

"...Huh...?"

I frowned at his incredibly patronizing way of speaking, but Lambard continued regardless.

"So, I heard someone was stealing milk, and I thought I might as well catch the culprit for them, so I was keeping watch on the street this morning. Then, suddenly, that idiot Roberts stopped moving... I went to check on him and heard a strange noise. I didn't want anyone to see me there and get the wrong idea. I was about to leave

when I was suddenly called a thief."

"I see. So it's like this." Kite nodded. "You wanted a job here, but since your relationship with Mr. Roberts was bad during the stagecoach days, it was hard to bow your head and say 'please hire me.' So you were hanging around our place wondering what to do. When you heard about the milk thief, you thought that if you solved the case, you could get a job while acting like we owed you a favor without having to bow your head—"

"...I didn't say I 'wanted' a job... I said 'I wouldn't mind' taking one." Lambard corrected Kite's words, still looking away.

...Well... there are certainly people like that in the world... people who can only speak in a patronizing way and end up being hated everywhere... simply put, Lambard is that type of person.

"I see. If that's the case, it does make sense."

"Right?" Lambard acted as if he had proven his point, so I kicked him in the head again.

"Don't act so proud. Just because your story makes sense doesn't prove you're innocent."

"I'm telling you, I'M INNOCENT! Besides, why would I have to do such a thing in the first place!?"

"Harassment." Mr. Roberts and I answered in perfect harmony.

"I'm telling you, it's not! Besides, you people! Did you see me drinking milk or running away with a can!?"

"Even if we didn't see that— ...A can!?"

For the first time, I realized. This morning, Lambard was not carrying a can. Come to think of it, the "medium-sized can" that was always stolen wasn't giant, but it wasn't small enough to be hidden and carried around secretly. How did the culprit manage to swap it every morning without being noticed? What was the culprit doing with all that milk, which was too much for one person? Why was only Mr. Roberts being targeted?

And—the moment one more element was added to that, a puzzle was completed in my head! The mystery is solved!

"—Hey, what's wrong?" Mr. Roberts called out from the side, and I snapped back to reality.

"...I figured it out..."

"Figured it out... what?"

I looked around at everyone. "**The culprit is among us!**"

Everyone was silent for a moment—

"...I know. It's this guy, right?" Mr. Roberts smacked Lambard's head.

—True—if we just decided Lambard was the culprit, everything would end smoothly.
—Wait—would it really?

"...No, that’s not it..."

"Not it?" Mr. Roberts asked with a frown. "What's not it?"

"I mean—Lambard isn't the culprit."

"What!?" The voices of shock echoed in the small room.

"Hey! What do you mean by that!?"

"Exactly what I said. ...Now..." I turned my gaze directly to Melone. "Don't you have anything to say? Melone."

The air in the room froze. Kite, who looked at Melone as if struck by lightning, turned to me. "Are you saying... Melone...!"

Before he could finish. *SLAM!* Melone threw open the door and dashed out.

"Melone!"

"We're chasing her!"

"Right!"

"Ah! Hey!"

Leaving behind only the tied-up Lambard, we ran after her.

"Wait! Melone!"

"Don't come any closer!"

At my command, Melone stopped at the edge of the backyard and turned around. Overwhelmed by her desperate intensity, the three of us stopped in our tracks.

Melone stared at me. "...How... did you know...?"

"Melone! Then it really was you...!" Kite cried out, but she just painfully averted her gaze.

I began to speak quietly. "...The culprit was swapping the milk cans... that was the key. When I went with Mr. Roberts this morning, I noticed that even at that hour, there’s foot traffic in some places. In such a situation, the culprit was walking around with a can that’s not exactly small. And yet, no one thought the culprit was suspicious... In other words, the culprit was someone for whom carrying a milk can was perfectly normal—a milk delivery person!"

"...No way..."

"If it’s her, no one would notice if she had one extra can on her wagon. It would be easy for her to stop by her house or somewhere along the route and hide the stolen can."

"That’s crazy! Besides, she has no motive!"

"—The motive is—"

I turned a quiet gaze toward Kite. "You."

"Me!?"

"Yes—you proposed to her. She likes you, too. That is her motive."

"...I don't really understand what you're talking about...?"

"She was worried. She was happy about your proposal. But if she accepted it, you would find out her secret. Would you still love her even after knowing her secret? That’s what she wondered."

"...Secret...?"

"And she chose to deal with it quickly—and caused this incident. If she took milk from her own wagon, she’d be the first to be suspected. But she couldn't steal from the wagon of the Kite she loves, and the route was too far. So, looking at the locations, she had to take it from Mr. Roberts. If an incident occurred, it wouldn't be unnatural to delay her answer. And above all—she needed the milk!"

"...I still don't quite see the connection? Besides, she lives alone. That amount of milk is too much for one person."

I let out a small sigh at Mr. Roberts' lack of understanding of a maiden's heart and turned my gaze to Melone. "...What will you do? I first noticed when I bumped into

you while chasing Lambard... shall I explain? Or..."

With tears in her eyes, she stared intently at Kite and thrust her right hand into her dress. *Thud-thud.* From her hand, a bundle of cloth fell to the ground. I instinctively looked away.

"—That’s right—" she said, resolutely. "Actually, my chest is padded! I actually have no chest!"

At her blood-curdling cry, both Mr. Roberts and Kite were stunned.

".....Uh..."

"...I still don't quite get it..."

"FOR HEAVEN'S SAKE! It's because she didn't want anyone to know she has no chest! She was drinking milk to try and make her chest bigger! That’s why she needed that much milk!"

"...Ah..." Mr. Roberts gave a dazed reply.

"She could have drunk it at the office, but she was terrified that if she did, her secret would be found out! That’s why she was driven to such measures!"

"...No... but... over something like that..."

"What do you mean 'something like that'!?" Melone cried out at Mr. Roberts' insensitive words. "Can anyone... other than Miss Lina... understand how a girl with no chest feels!?"

...Hey... bringing me up as an example makes me want to kill you a little...

"...I... I am...!"

"That’s enough, Melone!" I cut her off.

"...Miss Lina..."

"...It's okay... And... listen well, Melone. The idea that drinking milk makes your chest bigger... it's just a superstition. As proof... I... drank plenty of it, but..."

The second half was beyond words, and I just quietly shook my head.

And then—"Uwaaaaaaaaaah!" Melone collapsed on the spot and burst into tears.

It was a sad—in many ways, far too sad—conclusion to the incident.

"...Melone..."

Slowly, Kite walked toward her.

"Don't come any closer!"

"Why... didn't you tell me..." He kept walking, ignoring her. "Actually, I... had something I had to tell you, too..."

"I told you not to come closer!"

"—I—" Kite reached out and gently placed his hand on her shoulder. "Actually, I... prefer girls with smaller chests..."

—*Gasp!*— Melone looked up. "Kite!"

"Melone!"

And so, Kite and Melone embraced!

"...But... Kite... I committed a crime..."

"It’s okay, Melone. We'll just frame it so that 'the culprit was Lambard' and everything will be solved. You won't be in any trouble."

"You're right! Oh! Thank you, Kite!"

While saying something quite terrible so casually, the two embraced tighter and tighter. In front of me, who was choking back tears of emotion, and Mr. Roberts, who was still dazed—

(Except for Lambard) everyone lived happily ever after.

("Milk Elegy": End)

Afterword

Author: It’s summer! It’s fireworks! It’s eyeballs!

L: And with that, we bring you *Slayers Special: Full Speed! Stagecoach!* ...Wait... did you just casually say "eyeballs"? What on earth...?

Author: Don't worry about it! Just think of it as a poetic epithet for "summer"!

L: What kind of summer is *that*?

Author: Never mind that! We’ve got TV, movies, and et cetera! Not to mention the Mini-Bunko books! The game is coming out at the same time, too! There’s so much we should be talking about!

L: Hmph! True enough! By the way, from the second half of this afterword, we’ll be bringing you a massive 400-page mid-term report on the *Slayers* popularity poll! (Just kidding.)

Author: Well, by the time the first edition of this book hits the shelves, the second Mini-Bunko volume and the game should be out, and the movie will be just about to premiere! The TV show should be reaching its climax, too!

L: Oh, speaking of the TV show—that woman standing behind Xellos in the opening? That’s not Lina; it’s the human version of Beast Master Zelas Metallium. Which means... what about my screen time in *TRY*...?

Author: Come to think of it, I heard a rumor you might show up in the eye-catches or something, but as of writing this afterword, I haven't seen you yet.

Subordinate S: Well, whether or not a character appears on TV or radio directly impacts their number of votes, after all.

L: Hey, don't just jump in out of nowhere... wait, number of votes!? Hold on, tell me more about that!

Subordinate S: Understood! Well, since this topic is related to the popularity poll... in response to L’s request... let's get right to it! We will now conduct the *“The Sky is Blue, Señorita! The 3rd Slayers Popularity Poll of Love and Friendship!”* second mid-term report!

Author: ...In response to L’s request...? Aren't you just trying to start early to increase your own screen time...?

THUD.

Subordinate S: Now then! Now that the Author has been silenced thanks to the corner of an encyclopedia...!

L: ...Humans are such fragile creatures...

Subordinate S: Let's start with the official ranking announcement for the first part of the tally, up through February!

L: Come to think of it, you kept the rankings vague last time.

Subordinate S: Yes! Last time, Lady L entered the top three, which was a major upse—I mean, an absurdity... no, the result as it truly should be...

L: I hope I went up! (Excited)

Subordinate S: Last time, 10th place was Chaos Dragon Gaav, 9th was my humble self, Subordinate S! 8th was the Big Sister from back home, 7th was Naga, 6th Amelia, 5th Gourry, 4th Zelgadis, 3rd was Lady L, 2nd was Xellos, and 1st was Lina!

L: Hmm. I bet there are some Gourry fans out there who read the last report and thought, "Gourry is above Zel," and are now screaming, "Whaaaaaat!?"

Subordinate S: Also, those fans who believed, "Master S is surely around 7th place"...

L: They don't exist. Not a single one.

Subordinate S: ...*Sob, sob, sob*...

L: Anyway. The problem is what happened when we added the May tally to that.

Subordinate S: Exactly! This is the total tally up through May...

10th Place! An incredible leap forward! **Beast General Sherra!**

L: WHAAAAAAAAT!?

Subordinate S: Yeah, even I was surprised by this one.

L: ...Sherra...? The same Sherra who was competing for dominance against things like "The Demon King's Hand-Stitched Gold Lame Tuxedo" and "The Nyara-Nyara Pot" last time!?

Subordinate S: That’s the one.

L: You don't mean that myna bird from that old *Sinbad’s Adventures* anime!?

Subordinate S: Who even knows that reference...? Besides, that’s not a *Slayers*

character...

L: ...Hmm... she really did make a huge leap, didn't she?

Subordinate S: Right? Moving on, **9th place** is me, Subordinate S! **8th place** is Naga the Serpent! **7th place** is the Big Sister from back home!

L: ...Does that mean Gaav fell off the list?

Subordinate S: That's how it looks. Though it's not that Gaav's votes didn't grow, but rather that other characters' votes grew faster.

L: Especially Sherra.

Subordinate S: Yes. And then! **6th place** is Amelia, the Ally of Justice; **5th place** is Gourry; and **4th place** is Zelgadis. This area remains unchanged!

L: ...Wait a minute... if this area is unchanged... that means I made a massive jump forward!?

Subordinate S: No. 3rd place.

L: .....Oh... I see... ..... —Wait, then that means!?

Subordinate S: Yes! Exactly! **2nd place!** The protagonist, **Lina Inverse!** And, defeating Lina by a narrow margin to leap into the top spot is—!

Author: Is it me!?

L & S: NO, IT'S NOT!

WHACK!

L: ...Hmph... to revive just to throw in a one-liner gag...! The Author is not to be underestimated!

Subordinate S: ...W-well... anyway... let's pull ourselves together for the announcement! The glorious **1st place** is—by now, it's obvious! The popular guy among us monsters! The bureaucratic **Beast Priest Xellos!**

L: WHAAAAAAAAAT! Hmm! So the era of the monsters has finally arrived!

Subordinate S: It certainly feels that way! Regarding the voting pattern, it seems there's a strong tendency for votes to cluster around "characters who have been active in something recently."

L: ...You mean the novels, TV, or Radio Drama CDs?

Subordinate S: Yes. Sherra and Wyne, who didn't get many votes in the first tally, got quite a few between the first and second tallies. And once the TV show started, the female vote for "The villain Xellos in the OP is incredibly cool" exploded. As a result, he narrowly overtook Lina, who had a significant lead in the first part.

L: Hmm, I see. By the way, what does it look like from 10th place down?

Subordinate S: Yes. From 11th down, the order is: Gaav, Phibrizzo, Lemmy, Sylphiel, Filia, Salina, Valgaav, Author, Natalie, and Luke. This area is quite crowded, so depending on how the votes come in from now on, these characters have a good chance of entering the top ten.

L: But if Lina and Xellos are neck-and-neck...

Subordinate S: Yes. To keep everyone in suspense, I won't announce the exact vote difference, but depending on future votes, we could easily see turnarounds and counter-turnarounds.

L: And what about me?

Subordinate S: .....

L: ...Well...? Why are you being silent and looking away...?

Subordinate S: A-anyway! Depending on how the characters perform in various media in the future, it's still anyone's guess how this gap will change!

L: Hey! Don't dodge the question! What about my chances of ranking up!?

Subordinate S: How will the characters from this summer's movie get involved!? Please look forward to future mid-term reports!

L: ...No... I'm asking about my...

Subordinate S: Well then! We're running out of space! This concludes the *"3rd Slayers Popularity Poll: 2nd Mid-term Report"*...

L: ...Ho hooo... so, before I knew it, you've become important enough to ignore me. Is that it?

Subordinate S: ...Gasp! No, that's not... wait! Lady L! That 2-liter bottle of Oolong tea you're holding in a reverse grip is...!?

POW.

L: —And now that Subordinate S has been knocked out by an eco-friendly method of attack. Please keep those votes coming! But please stop sending things like, "This is a

sympathy vote from my pet cat; one point for Lady L" with a cat’s paw print on it. Even I get a little sad about that. Anyway, until next time, everyone. Farewell!

—And so the curtain quietly closes, as the summer sun shines down on the fallen Author and Subordinate S...

Afterword: The End